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RANCH ROMANCES

Ethel Wilson

Second July 1939 Number

Invading Hoofs

By CLEE WOODS

HERBERT A. WOODBURY

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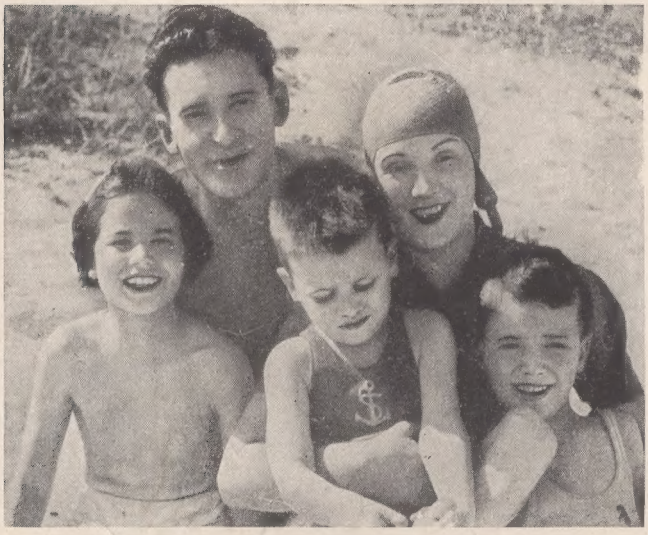

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Vol. LXXXVIII

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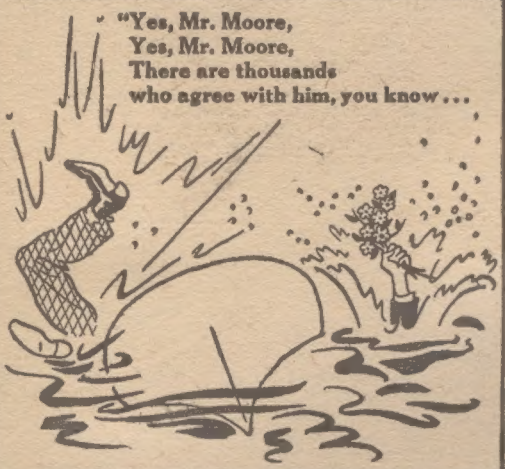

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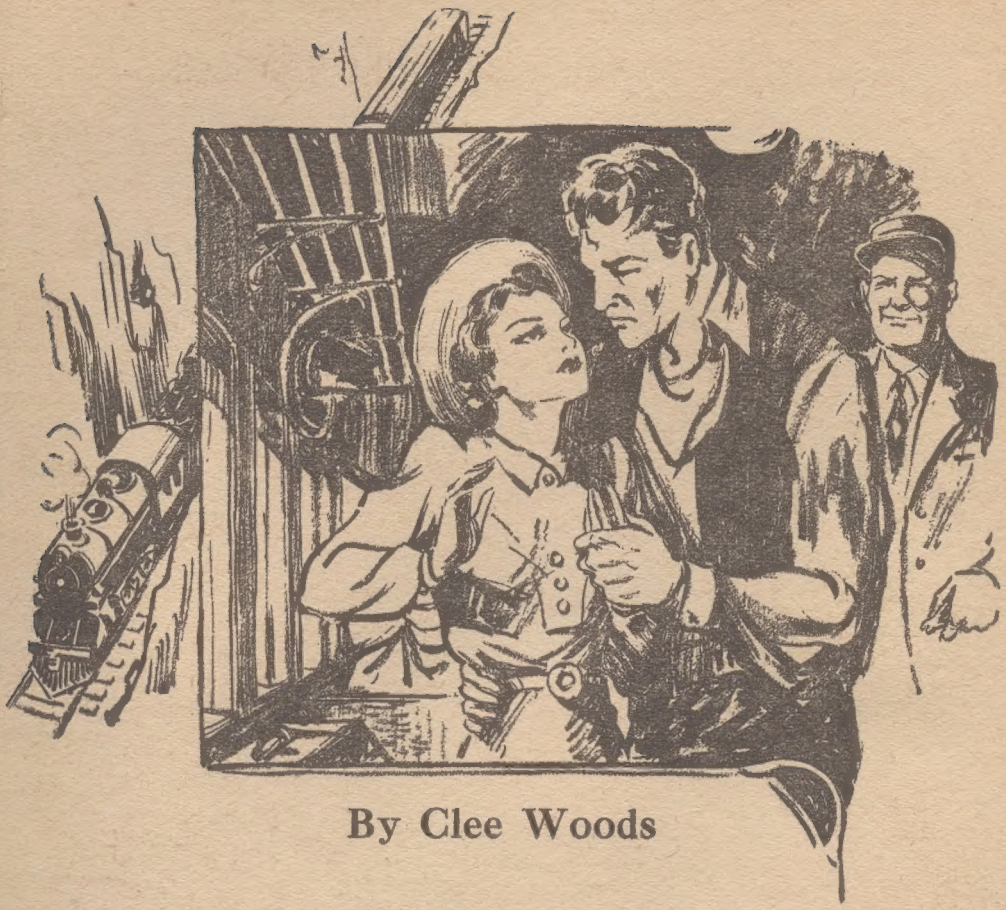


By Clee Woods

Invading Hoofs

The deep, unswerving faith that an old Frontiersman and a brave young girl put in Lancaster changed his life for him and made him a fighting fool, almost invulnerable to enemies and treachery and hate.

CHAPTER I

Deadline in Smoky Saddle

DROUGHT lay hot and shimmering over Morton Basin. The dry grass was eaten down to the roots. A new, four-strand "bobwire" fence stretched for two hundred yards across Smoky Saddle, from a hundred-foot cliff on one side to a rocky ridge point on the other. North of the Saddle there was always grass because "Little Welty" Morton knew enough to keep some good range in reserve, and this summer he had been blessed with a few light rains when the rest of Morton Basin got none.

Now a herd of seven thousand cattle spread sullenly in the canyon just south of that bobwire fence. It was pitiful to listen to the constant low mooing and see the hungry muzzles lift to the north and sniff longingly at the air.

Young Zeke Lancaster sat on a rock

ledge north of the bobwire, a .45-70 Winchester near his hand. On his right, four Eighty M buckaroos sat behind rocks, rifle muzzles in plain view of the invaders. On the cliff top opposite, five more Eighty M riders were looking down at the saddle fence with equal grimness. For Homer Starr and ten men were riding up toward the fence. Two of them carried wire pliers in their hands. Zeke rose and planted his size eleven boots on the rimrock.

"Starr, that's far enough," he called.

Starr never pulled rein on his horse. His backers began to spread out, that they might approach the fence at different points. At least as many more men down in the canyon began to whoop and yell at the weak, sore-footed cattle, pushing them toward the fence.

Zeke knew that exactly nine of the men south of the fence were nesters and "milkpen" ranchers who by fair means or foul were trying to make a living from their small bunches of stock. The tenth rancher was Homer Starr; he owned fully half the seven thousand starving cattle. He had leased range from the small ranchers, and that overstocking was the chief cause for the drought's havoc among the small herds.

Little Welty Morton claimed that Starr had leased from the milkpeners with the secret purpose of enlisting them against him when they faced the inevitable shortage of grass. Zeke thought Starr was just hard pressed for grass; and Starr had that queer make-up which feels keenly the least opposition.

Anyway, the entire force was in no temper to let a new fence stop them. Starr had about fourteen riders of his own to back up the milkpenners, many hired extra for this invasion. He had borrowed money to make sure he had more than enough men to dispose of Morton quickly.

"You pull a trigger on us, Lancaster," he flung back at the rimrocks, "and we'll blast you out of that cowardly hiding place!"

Zeke had no immediate word for that taunt. Slowly, the blood burned into his tanned cheeks. He stood six feet three inches tall; he was lean, rawboned. His head was thin and long; his gray eyes deep-set and grave. By an exchange of his brown Stetson, gray wool shirt, and angora chaparejos for homespun breeches and lindsay shirt, he might have been another Abe Lincoln at age twenty-three.

With deliberate slowness his rifle stock lifted to his shoulder. The rifle cracked and the heavy bullet tore a ragged piece loose from the front peak of Starr's black Stetson and left it dangling before his eyes as a warning signal not to be ignored.

Zeke just stood there stolidly and offered not another word in threat. He'd had his say. Every man down there south of the fence knew that at a word from him, bullets would start biting at flesh and blood instead of Philadelphia felt. They began to yank horses to a halt. Two actually headed their animals back south. The bluff had been called. Less than two dozen men wanted to stay out there in the open and invite a crossfire from ten or twelve well entrenched fighters.

"Men, come here," Starr called hastily.

He pulled back a little and began to exhort his men. While he did so, a single rider emerged from the lodgepole pines on the south side of the trail. A slim rider in overalls and calico shirt. She was bareheaded, and her yellow hair parted at the back in two heavy braids and hung down to her thighs in front.

Then Zeke witnessed an odd thing. At a low word from this girl, some of the men began to move away from Starr and ride over to the girl. Starr gave up his harangue when half his men were leaving, and joined the procession moving toward the young woman. Zeke had seen Mary Temple several times in the past two years but he had never spoken to her. Only a vague rumor had come to Morton's

ranch of the power she was wielding over her neighbors. Now Zeke saw it with his own eyes.

She was talking in low, earnest words to the grass-hungry force. Heads began to nod agreement. Even Starr himself spoke up in approval. Then the girl parted from them and pushed her sorrel toward the fence. Starr remained behind and talked energetically to the fifteen men for a moment.

"Mr. Lancaster," Mary Temple called, "would you consider coming down and talking this thing over?"

The Eighty M cowboy nearest Zeke laughed. It was unthinkable that the foreman of a hard-fisted spread like the Eighty M should bother to powwow with a woman.

"Talk, ma'am," Zeke answered her, "will do no good. Not a single hoof down there goes through here, and there's not another word to be said."

She sat for a moment, pondering his hard decision. Zeke thought he could feel her disappointment in him. But he had been made foreman of the Eighty M spread just three days ago, with the express understanding that he was to halt Homer Starr.

"I still believe," the girl finally replied, "that you have the honesty to at least grant that there are two sides to this matter."

The words stung Zeke and his cheeks burned hot again. Yet what she said was more complimentary than disparaging. From this hour on Zeke marvelled at her ability to put her exact thoughts into easy, compelling words.

"Go down and knock her notions clean cockeyed, Zeke," urged Tood Graham, the slim cowboy who had just laughed. "Might save a lot of ammunition."

Zeke hesitated a little longer, then went climbing down through the rocks. He got his horse that had been tied behind a large boulder, and rode out to where the girl still waited for him at the fence. She sat her saddle with pride and dignity, yet there was something close to friendliness in her bearing. She was slender, well above medium height. The saddle had taken nothing from the perfection of lines from breast to ankle. Her face was slender, delicate in mold. Her large eyes were a glowing, soft brown with a dreamy wistfulness. Zeke knew that here was a girl who would think deeply and hate deeply—and love a man forever when she did love one.

For a moment Zeke looked across the fence into those lovely eyes with frank hostility. He did not like this dealing with a woman over a man's fight. Yet this was part of Mary's fight too.

ZEKE LANCASTER

Her father, a former small-town merchant, had sunk every penny he had left in buying out a nester's claim over two years ago. He had overworked, trying to build up a little herd among neighbors who knew too much about the cow business for him ever to make ends meet. Fever took Mary's mother in March and then the onset of the drought killed the father, although the doctor called it a stroke. Now Mary was trying to keep their cattle alive and keep a worthless older brother out of jail.

"Before you order your men to start shooting," she drove straight at her

purpose, "would you take a little ride down into this herd. You'll see hundreds of poor brutes reeling on their feet, others down and too weak to be tailed up. You'll even see milk cows dying, when in many cases there are children at home turning sallow and bony for want of milk."

Zeke did not like to speak against such an appeal. But he had no notion of going to inspect any misery which this blockade might be engendering.

"Let me ask," he said, "why somebody south of Smoky Saddle didn't think of grass shortage before they leased their range to Starr?"

Starr was sitting his horse beside the girl, but both she and Zeke chose to keep him out of the conversation. Starr was a man of broad shoulders and powerful build. He had bright, dark eyes with a peculiar glow. Mary was fond of his wife and six small children.

"It was inexperience in this country," Mary answered Zeke. "None of these men have been in the basin during drought times."

"But most of them," Zeke retorted, "got here in time to help take the basin away from Welty Morton."

"The basin never belonged to Mr. Morton," the girl vowed.

"He opened it up," Zeke reminded. "He built the road in."

Zeke knew that his words sounded weak. He could feel the bigness of the thing Little Welty Morton had done but he could not give it verbal expression.

Morton, his boss, was of the warp and woof of the Old West. It was his kind that had claimed the country from the Indians and put its stamp on the entire character of the land. Without his kind there would have been no great herds and no fighting cowboys and no feel of mighty strength in the wild, free country. That magnificent strength was being sapped on every range by the hoeman and the nester and the petty, rustling rancher. Zeke hated to see a girl like Mary Temple set against that old order. Her kind did not belong with the forces that were destroying men like Morton.

"If Morton had a right to it," Mary declared, "the government would give him patents for the land."

"The government," Zeke replied, "is a bunch of tenderfeet in Washington. They know as much about the right and wrong of matters out here as a hog does Sunday."

He said that with outward conviction, but he felt helpless under the judgment of this young goddess with the yellow braids hanging down over delicate curves. He got the suspicion that she was attempting to whip Little Welty Morton by taking the heart out of his fighting force. Her very looks gave power to whatever she said, where Zeke himself felt that he stumbled and hesitated and lost in words the power of his feelings.

"Did you by an chance mean a range hog?" she was quick to take up his comparison. "That sort of hog knows about Sunday but remains a hog nevertheless."

That cut Zeke to the quick. He could not let her talk about Little Welty in any such manner. Besides, she belonged with the mightiness of the cow country and with the glory of great old spreads.

"Call Mr. Morton a range hog, huh?" he reported. "You couldn't if you'd been here and seen nesters and milkpenners drive him back fence by fence, until now he's got only this upper neck of the basin left. A range hog would've hired gun-slingers to kill off a bunch of nesters, instead of forever backin' up peaceful like Little Welty did."

"He's still a rich cowman," she kept on hammering at his faith in his boss. "What does he need with all his money?"

"It isn't what he needs," Zeke scored well, "but what the country needs. It needs men like him. They make the country pay. Nesters starve and steal and finally give up and drift on. It's sorta like dryin' up that river back

there to destroy a man like Mr. Morton."

"And what is it like," she countered in that low, husky voice, "to see little children starving while their father's few cattle fall dead for want of something to eat?"

Her question suggested another reason why he had to remain loyal to Welty Morton. The rancher had picked him up in town twelve years ago, a hungry, sallow kid of eleven who had been too proud to beg or to tell his plight to others. That was a month after a Montana snowslide had swept away his mountain home and destroyed father and mother and sisters and left him buried eight feet in snow, until rescuers dug him out.

Most of all, Zeke appreciated the manner in which Morton had put him on as a kid wrangler when he couldn't even bridle a horse. But Zeke knew now that it had been the old rancher's way of saving his pride and helping him preserve the independence to which he clung with fierce tenacity. But Zeke had no wish to go into that when the young woman was pleading for other kids whom she said were hungry and ragged.

The girl continued, "That's what you refuse to go see, Mr. Lancaster, while you know your boss has ten sections of waist-high grass on Goose Creek that has never had a hoof on it this summer. This herd is going up to eat that grass!"

"You bet it's going," Homer Starr put in. "Lancaster, give your men orders to head out of here or you'll never live to give another order."

Starr's ten riders edged a little nearer. At a wave of Starr's hand, ten guns leaped into their hands and pointed at Zeke.

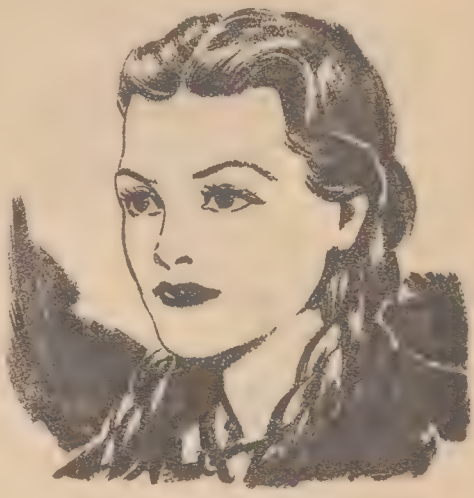
"Talk quick," Starr urged, "before some nervous trigger finger starts off the fight that'll take you first."

Indignation swept through Zeke. He was tricked, and the slight curl of his full upper lip accused Mary Temple of being party to the trick.

"Go ahead and shoot!" he cried. "If that's what you come here for, you can have it!"

Mary did not answer. Instead, she started her horse back for the quarter circle of men who had drawn weapons at a signal from Starr. The thing had worked too smooth not to have been planned in advance.

"So you would use me for a double-cross on an enemy?" she hurled at the line of men. "I called the Eighty M foreman down here under a truce and he's going back safe."



MARY TEMPLE

"Not," Starr put in, "until he orders his men off the rocks and lets that fence come down."

The girl whirled on Starr. Zeke was amazed at the sudden change in her. All her deliberateness seemed swept away in a rush of anger. Nothing new seemed to come alive in her; it had been there all this time, that rare queenliness of authority and strength, but when she was aroused it flamed with an intensity that made her a different woman. Yet she scarcely lifted her voice above its usual quiet level.

"Homer," she said, "we'll fight fair or not at all."

"Of course we will, Mary," Starr protested. "I've been called to free this

country of Morton's power and I'll do it with fit honor to that call."

Starr's yellowish eyes burned with fanatical fire. Zeke felt that here was a man who was going to be very dangerous. In spite of the fact that Starr owned half the cattle in the drive, he seemed genuinely possessed with the notion that he had a mission to fulfill in crushing Little Welty Morton.

"I'm warning you, Lancaster," he hurled across the fence, "that I'm going to wait for the time when you can't hide behind a woman's petticoat!"

The taunt caused something to explode inside Zeke. He never could understand afterward why he let it strip him of all reason in the three seconds that he glared across the bobwire, into Starr's yellow, cougar-like eyes. Hiding behind Mary Temple's petticoat, eh?

"You lousy hypocrite!" broke from Zeke's lips with angry disgust.

Starr's face flushed hot. "Lancaster," he cried, "you take that back!"

"You lousy hypocrite!" Zeke repeated, and laughed in the man's face.

It was too much for Starr. He swung his horse up beside the wire, jerked his feet up onto the saddle and leaped over the fence. Then he went to unbuckling his gun belt.

"Get down," he challenged.

His gun and belt thudded onto the ground. Zeke barely remembered the odd silence that followed that thud. There was no sound from the girl. No sound from the Eighty M buckaroos lined on the rocks above them; no sound from the invading riders back there some fifty yards from them.

Slowly, Zeke lifted a long leg over the saddle. Deliberately he took off his gun belt and hung it on his saddle horn. Deliberately he stepped away from his horse.

Starr made for him with a rush. Zeke's long right arm made a circling movement and his big fist went driving at Starr's chin as the man came in. Starr's bull-like head ducked handily and his shabby black hat fell off. Zeke's fist swooped through thin air and he nearly fell off balance when it did not connect with Starr's jaw. Starr drove into him with all the might of his hundred and ninety pounds. His powerful arms closed around Zeke's lanky body. He took him crashing to the ground.

Starr's weight nearly knocked the breath from Zeke. He tried to whirl the man over. But a pair of heavy fingers were closing about his throat. His wind was cut off. He feared that the fingers were going to tear his throat out. He fought fiercely with both hands to get that terrible hold broken. It got worse. Things turned dark before his eyes.

Then a fist landed against his jaw. Again and again it struck. Zeke tried frantically to hold onto his senses. He made a desperate whirl and wrenched the fingers loose from his throat. Still nearly blind, he tried to scramble to his feet. Twice again the fist struck. Then a third time and Zeke was knocked out cold.

CHAPTER II

Malice Toward None

HOMER STARR glared down at Zeke a moment, then turned to Mary. "I hated to do it, Mary," he panted, "but Morton is half whipped now."

Mary could not be glad. She had a feeling of guilt, although she could not have made any charges against herself. She did not know much about the ethics of men's fist fights; there was hardly any serious accusation she could name against Starr. Yet she felt that he was guilty of something unforgivable. Zeke Lancaster lay over there with his face rooted sideways into the grass, blood trickling from his nose and his puffing lip.

For a few minutes she was so uncertain of things that she allowed Starr his way. He was bawling up at the Eighty M men behind the rocks, threatening them with annihilation if they

did not clear out. Mary just then began to realize what Zeke had caught a moment earlier, that here was a zealot who was ready to do anything for the sake of what he was pleased to designate as his call."

"Nope," Tood Graham shouted back, "because you licked Lancaster is no sign we're all licked. Them cows don't go through."

Starr talked back, sometimes so persuasively that Mary was surprised. Twenty minutes went by, and still they remained deadlocked. The Eighty M cowboys were disheartened by the sight of their foreman lying down there unconscious. But they had dogged grit. Mary called her allies back a short distance. Leadership of this force remained divided between her and Starr.

"If we'll only wait," she counselled, "I believe they'll weaken and not fight."

"They'll weaken, all right," Starr declared.

Mary was puzzled by an eager look on his face. The men seemed tensed, waiting for something. She caught more than one man glancing repeatedly at the rocks above them.

Then it happened. The Eighty M men in the rocks began scurrying back to higher ground. Starr had left only a skeleton force to whoop and yell at the cattle. He had divided the rest into two bunches. He had sent one bunch stealing up on a circuitous route, to come in back of the Eighty M buckaroos. The latter had a guard out, however, and discovered the trick before they were completely surprised. But they had to abandon their positions.

"All right, boys, cut loose at 'em," Starr snapped.

Control was out of Mary's hands. The men ran for rocks and low banks and began crashing bullets against the rocks around the Eighty M buckaroos. They fired back, still doggedly determined to hold the Saddle. But a bullet caught one of the buckaroos in the abdomen. He hunched forward, stumbled behind a rock. Another got an arm shattered.

HOMER STARR

"Pour it to 'em!" Starr cried, not because his aroused men needed much urging but more to take the heart out of the seven Eighty M riders left to fight. "Every man of 'em we kill makes peace for this basin just that much nearer."

The odd part of it was that Starr fired his followers with his zeal until they seemed to forget they were fighting for a selfish cause. Their guns roared louder. Bullets slapped the rocks incessantly. The Eighty M men fought back, but only in desultory fashion.

Mary sat in behind a bank, stunned. War! Blood! And she was a part of it. That poor fellow stumbling in behind a rock, death spreading upward from his bloody abdomen! Another lucky if he could get off with an amputated arm. That was what she had helped bring on, to feed starving babies and starving cattle.

All at once Mary leaped forward. A Starr hireling was taking sly aim on the unconscious form of Zeke Lancaster. "Don't you do that, Beardly!" she cried.

She was too late. The man's trigger finger cramped. The bullet, however, only splashed dirt onto Zeke's black hair. Mary kicked the rifle aside, then seized it and tore it from the hands of unshaven, dish-faced Beardly.

"Beardly," she accused huskily, "you tried to murder him!"

"It's all in a range war," Beardly growled.

"Beardly," Starr roared interruption, "get to work with that six-shooter. It's better to kill off a few hired crooks than wait till they kill some of these fathers and leave orphan families on our hands."

Beardly gave Mary a defiant twist of the lips and thrust his six-shooter upward over the bank. It had an ugly roar.

Mary sank down behind the bank. Chaos swirled in her heart. It was her war. She had preached it to her neighbors and even to Starr's hired riders, men like Beardly. Now she realized that she had failed to understand that in preaching war on Morton she also had been calling for the blood of his loyal cowboys.

The fight did not last long. The Eighty M men, heavily outnumbered, were compelled to take to the mountain sides. Starr sent a dozen men to run them entirely away. Jubilant and with his eyes strangely burning, Starr went over to the fence and began shooting wires in two. Pliers began to work. Exulting riders rushed back and got the entire herd on the trot for the gap.

Still Zeke Lancaster lay out there. The cattle might trample him down for all Starr did about it. Mary ran out to Zeke, ahead of the wall of advancing whitefaces. She split the trotting cattle about the prostrate man and stood over him while the cattle drifted by in two steady streams. Hundreds of the poor, weak creatures; a thousand, two thousand, three, five and on until only the drags were left of the seven thousand. Moving on for Goose Creek, to put flesh on their bones and restore hope in the hearts of their owners. Mary tried to rejoice at the thought, but somehow it was a hollow effort.

When the drags were past, Starr came up to her. "It's been tough on you, Mary," he said with a show of tenderness, "but you've got to forget about individuals like Lancaster and think only of old Morton, the man who hogs this grass from poor fellows like Lambert and Kayles. Come on, leave Lancaster to come to in his own way. He won't have the nerve to show his face among real men again."

Mary got to her horse and rode on with Starr. He was right. She had to think of grass back-high to cows that only now were going up onto Goose Creek to eat it. And of the pinched little face of John Lambert's baby, dying by degrees on breast milk from an undernourished mother. But while she told herself these things, she was glancing back at a long, gangling figure lying on the north side of the new fence posts and tangled wire.

A queer hurt stole into her heart, along with that deepening sense of guilt. You could not hurt a man like Lancaster and feel good about it. Somehow, Mary felt the quality of his soul and she knew that it had no malice toward any man.

CHAPTER III

Whipped!

LANCASTER bolted awake to a sitting position. It was a lonely spot, here where rock walls looked down at the ruins of a new fence. The grass was soiled by the trample of twenty-eight thousand hoofs. Across by a rock lay the body of a man. Johnny Milton! Shot through the belly. Johnny must have tried to get out to a doctor, but death had left him here in the Saddle which he had tried to defend.

Zeke read the whole pitiful story. Then there swept over him a crushing, humiliating sense of defeat. The pain of it heightened in his gray, deep-set eyes. He smothered something like a groan that was breaking from him. Whipped! And Welty Morton's outfit was whipped.

There came back to him the words of his boss only a few days ago: "Boy, you're young for this job, but I'm callin' on you to do it because you've got it in you, lad. And I've allus wanted to give you a chance like this."

It had been a weak moment for Little Welty when he said that, for he seldom ever had shown sentiment. Zeke had grown up under him and Little Welty had bestowed back-handed favors on him occasionally, but he had made little attempt to take the place of a father with the foundling boy whom he brought home that cold winter night twelve years ago.

"Got it in you!" Zeke muttered between thickened lips. "Where in you, Zeke Lancaster?"

LITTLE WELTY MORTON

He arose and walked over to Johnny Milton's body. It was still warm. Zeke spread some balsam boughs over it. Then he started out of the Saddle—heading south, away from the Eighty M.

But his long legs slowed. He was letting himself off too easy. He owed it to Little Welty to go back and tell him what had happened, if the full story had not reached him already. Another thing took Zeke back. It was the feeling that he had it coming to him, the shame and humiliation that would go with facing Little Welty and telling him how miserably he had bungled matters.

He had to walk all that eight miles back to headquarters. The first part of the way was over ground cut up by the invading hoofs. Every step of it jabbed him with the hurt of his failure. His tight boots began to burn, then the soles of his feet hurt. He didn't care. His throat felt swollen and raw. He met not a living soul on the trail down to headquarters, and he was glad for that.

The sun sank behind the jagged scarps that rose above timberline in the west. Zeke stalked past the river bottoms that sent up their smells of the first new wild hay in the rick. Then past the big home pasture, into which he had been throwing beef steers by the hundreds before they had to quit the beef round-up and go to Smoky Saddle.

Dusk began to fall. He ducked past the big butcher windlass up a side canyon from the bunkhouse, and the next moment heard the two lion hounds begin to bark at him from the log cabin of Bill Shattuck. Shattuck had come here in the spring as blacksmith and general handyman of the ranch.

"Hello, Zeke!"

It was Nellie Shattuck's greeting. She was leaning on the back gate. A small blue-eyed girl with white hands and pretty face except for a high, round forehead that proclaimed intelligence rather than beauty. Although she was a year older than Zeke, this girl had "set her cap" for Zeke months ago, but without his knowing it.

"Hello, Nellie," he said and bore on for the big house.

"Zeke, come here."

It was an entreaty, and a tender one. He knew that she had heard all about it. His heart warmed a trifle toward her. She slipped through the gate and came toward him; a mere wraith of a girl in the shadows, wearing the blue dress that he liked. He stood stolidly until she came up and took hold of his arm.

"Boy," she said softly, "it's nothing to worry about. Your real friends will be with you through thick and thin."

"I'm not askin' anybody to be with me," Zeke said bluntly.

Somehow he meant that more for her than he did anybody else. She frightened him. Not so much by what she said as by the way she fairly took possession of him. He wanted nothing but to have his round with Little Welty and then clear out.

"But they are with you, Zeke, more than you ever have dreamed of," she vowed. "Come on, go with me."

"I'd rather you didn't go with me," he told her.

"But you don't have the least idea about it," she cooed.

"About what?"

"The good news."

"There's no such animal, not for me."

"Wrong again, dear."

It was the first time any term of endearment had ever passed between them.

"Little Welty wants to see us together," she continued. "I know, I know," she cut him off when he would have protested. "But I've not let anybody tell him yet about—about what happened in Smoky Saddle. The cowboys got in, yes. They're over there in the bunkhouse now. But Little Welty has been waiting for you to come in. He has the surprise of your life for you. I won't spoil it for him. Come on."

She pulled him toward the big house. Zeke saw lights in the bunkhouse, but there was a subdued calm about the place. He caught the smell of chloroform.

"Dr. Myles is taking Shorty's arm off, I suppose," said Nellie. "He got it shattered in the fight."

Zeke stopped dead still. Through the window of the bunkhouse he saw golden hair that went down in two braids over a lovely form. Then he got a brief look at Mary Temple's face. It was quiet, a little pale, and still very lovely and womanly. She was acting as nurse for the country surgeon. She had come in to do that for an enemy cowboy, when Nellie "supposed" they were taking Shorty's arm off. The comparison struck Zeke forcibly, and he wondered how he had ever thought that Nellie was sweet and beautiful.

"Don't go in to bawl her out now," Nellie urged, tugging Zeke's arm again. "She brought Shorty in a little while ago, and it was lucky the doctor was here to see Mr. Morton. The cowboys told me how she tricked you down from the rocks, and likely as not she has some trick up her sleeve in fetching Shorty home."

"She's not tricky," Zeke defended Mary.

He walked on with Nellie. The blacksmith's daughter grew silent, as if something suddenly had claimed her thoughts.

Zeke's hour was at hand. He strode ahead of Nellie, into Little Welty's bedroom on the first floor of the big log house. A kerosene lamp burned low on a table beside the bed. Zeke stopped so that the left side of his face would be in the dimmest light, to hide the black eye and the swollen left side of his lip.

"Well, Zeke, you must've been workin' late," Morton greeted him.

The Eighty M owner was a small man well into the sixties. But he had a hard, square-set face, with big flat nose and a trimmed, sandy mustache. His blue eyes were still sharp and aggressive. Even propped up in bed, he was a man of force and character. Paralysis had struck his lower limbs and was creeping upward.

Somehow, in spite of his shame, Zeke faced this man with more backbone. Little Welty always had done that for him. It was an odd affection that existed between these two men. Neither had ever uttered a word that might not have passed between any boss and buckaroo, yet there was a strong, deep bond between them.

"Go yell for Hub," Morton told

NELLIE SHATTUCK

Uncle Ramsay, a grizzled Negro cook grown old in Little Welty's service and now his nurse.

"Seen anything of the nesters yet?" Morton asked during the wait.

"They report, Mr. Morton," Nellie hastened to answer for Zeke, "that Smoky Saddle is as lonesome as a graveyard—not a soul in miles."

Zeke started to blurt out his own report on Smoky Saddle. But Nellie placed a soft finger over his lips playfully and laughed, "Don't pester Mr. Morton with talk. He's got to save himself all he can. Here, let me show you what the moon looks like from the end of the porch, till Hub gets here."

She winked laughingly at Mr. Morton and pulled Zeke onto the long porch. This girl had gained the old rancher's admiration in town more than a year ago, before he hired her father. Zeke was distressed. Something was in the air, and he did not like it. But he found relief in the delay of his report to the boss. Nellie hung onto his arm at the end of the porch, but she seemed to feel his distress and was wise enough not to chatter.

Hub Buell, a second foster son of Morton, came jingling his spurs in a hurry. He was three years older than Zeke, and he had been here a year longer. Seldom ever on good terms with Zeke, he had resented keenly Zeke's appointment as foreman when Little Welty himself was struck from the saddle. He had not spoken to Zeke since Zeke accepted the job. Zeke had been sorry to see Hub taking it so sullenly.

"Come here, you mavericks," Morton summoned them inside.

They went in and stood beside his bed, Nellie between the two men. Buell was four inches under Zeke's height, but he was finely molded from handsome face down through superb shoulders and limbs. Only a whitish cast of his eyes spoiled his good looks. His black Stetson had cost thirty-five dollars; Zeke's brown one ten. Buell had on a black broadcloth shirt that cost twelve-fifty and his moleskin whipcord breeches cost twice that. His black boots were the finest in Justin's catalog. On his blue necktie was a full carat diamond stickpin, which he claimed he had won in a poker game. He did not remove his hat as they stood beside Morton's bed. Zeke had left his Stetson on the porch, and now his heavy black hair was out of order.

"Well," Morton began, as if afraid breath might not be spared to him much longer, "Doc Myles tells me I've got no more'n a month to stick around, mebbe only days. I'm not afraid to hit that old night trail, wherever she leads. But I've got a little around me and I don't want no damn swarm of lawyers to git it after I'm gone. Not havin' kith or kin in all the world that I know of or give a damn about, I'm goin' to make gifts of what I have to the ones I want to have it, while I'm still alive to see 'em take hold and enjoy it."

"It's so like you, Mr. Morton," Nellie murmured softly. "But why not spare yourself and get well?"

"And," Zeke vowed, "there's something more important than—"

"Shh!" Nellie stopped him, putting her hand across his mouth. "Perhaps we better let Mr. Morton get this off his mind, after all."

"My ranch is incorporated," Morton resumed, "with one thousand shares. I want it to stay together, lock, stock and barrel. I had a notary and witnesses here this afternoon, and fixed it up to give you five hundred and ten shares, Zeke. The remainin' four-ninety I'm givin' to this little girl."

He reached out for Nellie's hand and patted it. Hub Buell's face went an ashen hue, but nobody noticed it.

"I figured," Morton said, in the first expression of sentiment Zeke had ever heard him indulge in, "that you two kids would hitch up together in partnership anyways, and nothing would make me happier than to make certain of it."

"Oh, Mr. Morton, how did you know?" Nellie cried.

She dropped down beside the bed and kissed the old man who was creating such a strange entanglement in the first attempt of his life to be sentimental. Tears gushed to Nellie's eyes.

Zeke's knees started to tremble. He felt trapped, helpless. He wanted to run out of that room and never stop short of a thousand miles.

"But you're a-goin' to start in hard put to it for a time," Morton added, "because I aim to sell off my beef stuff from two-year-olds to fours, and the dry she-stuff. I'll stick twenty thousand in the bank for you two kids, expense money, and the rest of the cash goes to Hub—say, mebbe, one hundred and fifty thousand dollars."

Hub Buell's face still remained white. Zeke and the girl were getting the better of the gifts, by a hundred thousand dollars each. That hurt a man like Buell. He loved Nellie Shattuck, and Morton was as good as giving her to the man whom Buell suddenly hated with insane fury.

Little Welty ended his gift-making with the avowal: "But I'm holdin' all these papers in my possession till you prove to me, Zeke, that I ain't makin' no mistake. You've got to turn back the nesters, and do it up brown. I'm goin' to hold onto life till that's done, come all hell and high water. If you fail me—well, I know you won't fail me."

He smiled with pride at the gangling cowboy there above him. Stark panic swirled through Zeke's head. He would rather cut off a hand than hurt this hard old man who always had been hard to hurt. And this would, perhaps, kill him. Zeke felt he ought to say something, but he could not thank Welty Morton for what he had done. Nor could he break the news just now that the terms of the gift already were violated because seven thousand head of enemy cattle tonight were feeding on Goose Creek grass.

Zeke turned slowly, lips tight, and walked out of the room. Nellie tried to cover his lack of expression by profuse words to her benefactor. Even Buell lingered, mumbling his thanks.

Nellie went out to find Zeke, as soon as she could get away. But she met her father first. The little old blacksmith, like everybody else on the ranch, was disturbed at the disastrous turn of events. Of mechanical turn, Shattuck had spent every spare dollar he could get for many years, trying to invent this and that piece of machinery while shyster patent lawyers egged him on.

"Well," he whispered to his daughter, "you and Zeke all set to get hitched up? I'll be mighty proud, honey, for now I can go ahead with my automatic air-brake coupler patent. I'll speak to Zeke and—"

"Listen, Father," Nellie cut in, and the patent dreamer had never heard his daughter speak to him like this before. "You let me handle this in my own way. Don't you open your mouth to Zeke about money or patents."

"But Zeke knows I've got something in that automat—"

"Papa, stay out of it," the girl ordered, her voice shaky with tears. "I don't have a share of this ranch yet, nor do I have Zeke Lancaster."

"What? Ain't it all fixed?"

"No."

"Then I better speak to Zeke and praise you up all I can."

"Listen, Papa. You've kept me in ragged poverty all my life, but you have made me hungry, starving for riches, by promising me mints of money just as soon as this and that patent was finished. Oh, if you only knew how your promises have whetted my desire for all the things money can buy—clothes, high position, society!—only to be kept living on from year to year on beans and salt pork, and patching up the same old calico dresses. Don't you dare come between me and these things now, when I have reached out for them with my own hands!"

"Nell, you sound like you'd planned this from the day you met Little Welty."

"I have! Because I hate poverty so. Now I've got some more planning to do, desperate planning. You go back to that shack of ours, and let me handle her and Zeke and Little Welty."

"*Her?* Who's her?"

"Never mind, but the fight is not too thick yet for me to recognize the one person who stands between me and my dreams."

CHAPTER IV

Hard to Take

WANDERING out into the light of the full moon, Zeke felt stunned, bewildered. He was sick at heart. He knew he had to go back in there and tell Welty. There was no other way. Little Welty would find it out sooner or later and the longer he let the thing go like this the worse it would get.

But Zeke wandered on past the corrals instead of going back at once. He was afraid of what Little Welty's words had almost forced on Nellie and him. He had been with Nellie a good deal of late, much of it by happenstance as he had thought at the time. But Zeke did not see how it had been sufficient for the boss to conclude that he and Nellie had an understanding. Had Nellie somehow given Little Welty the wrong impression?

"Not purposely," he hastened to excuse her in thought, "for likely she wouldn't have me on a Christmas tree. But she talks a lot and she did pull hard for me to land the job as foreman. And ain't I a hell of a foreman?"

The last bitter thought caused him to twist about on boot heels and start back for the house. Nellie or no Nellie, it had to be done.

He saw the glow of a cigarette by the corral fence. A closer look revealed the outline of big Stetsons and dark forms. Zeke turned toward them. Five of his cowboys sat on their haunches, backs against the fence.

Zeke remembered all at once that he knew little of what had happened in Smoky Saddle after his clash with Homer Starr. He turned to the men.

"Boys," he demanded bluntly, "what happened in the Saddle after Starr put me to sleep?"

"They just smoked us up till we had to high-tail it," Rube Taylor said. "Johnny Milton was killed, and the doctor just now sawed Shorty's arm off."

Rube did not volunteer another word. Nothing of what they were thinking about or the predicament of the Eighty M. Zeke stood before them a moment, his heart aching at the loss of their faith. These boys had been his comrades in the saddle.

For a fleeting moment he wanted to ask them to stand by him. Instead, he walked away, his long, lanky body drooped a little under the weight of his shame. And fear had him—fear of himself, or of that thing that he felt was changing him within.

Nellie was coming to find him. When he first saw her he resented her fiercely. She halted him and looked up into his face beseechingly.

"You're going to drive those nesters out, Zeke," she said softly. "You're not

whipped. You've got to fight Starr and Mary Temple and their whole blood-hungry gang, for my sake and your own."

Her last six words were a soft whisper. Zeke noticed that it was the second time she had mentioned Mary Temple, and this time her animosity toward the other girl was more intense.

He did not have time to reply to her before Hub Buell came swinging down for them, hatred and battle in his manner. He did not halt until he was within three steps of Zeke and Nellie. She kept a hand on Zeke's arm, and Buell's glanced flashed onto that hand.

"When are you clearin' out?" he hurled at Zeke.

"He is not going at all," Nellie once more answered quickly for Zeke. "We own this spread now, Zeke and I. We're going to fight, too."

"You're going to fight, eh?" Buell flared back. "Then, perhaps, Lancaster, you'd like to start in on me if that's the sort of threats you're putting out."

Buell was enraged. Zeke got the feeling that this man who was almost his foster brother, wanted to kill him, because Buell believed Zeke had come between him and Nellie and also had robbed him of so much that he might have received in gift from Little Welty. In order that he might still have a chance at both money and the girl, Buell was trying to build up a claim of self-defense. He lifted his voice so that the men at the corral could hear, when he twisted Nellie's words into a threat from Zeke.

"Hub," Zeke said placatingly, "don't let's go at it this way. You've got no call to want to kill me, nor me you. Come on, let's go to the boss with the rest of what I've got to say."

Nellie sensed what Zeke had in mind. "No, not now, Zeke," she vetoed. "Come on, take a little walk with me. You'll feel better about it all."

"Yeah," Hub snarled, "take him for a walk in the moonlight and watch him run from his shadow, the cowardly——"

Hub spit out the ugliest word men ever use when they talk hard fighting talk. A tremble shot through Zeke. Just then he became aware of the fact that Mary Temple had stopped some dozen paces from them, on her way to the corral for her horse. The cowboys also had come moving over to witness the clash. They had heard the vile name that Hub had called him. Not a man of them, Zeke felt, would ever retain the least iota of respect for him if he didn't fight.

But Zeke stood there and never moved a hand. In his mind it was such a wanton thing for him and Hub to go for hardware and pour hot lead at each other until one was dead, for Zeke had no intention of robbing Hub either of his girl or money. As for the disgrace of a refusal to fight, Zeke felt that little more could be heaped upon him anyway. What hurt more than that was his dawning realization that Mary Temple had shaken his absolute belief in the rightness of his fight against Starr's forces, and Zeke could not fight unless his whole soul could be in it. That was what was wrong inside. Mary had shaken his convictions.

"Come on, we'll talk to the boss," he said to Hub.

"Well," Hub scoffed witheringly, "I thought I had a man to deal with!"

Zeke's right hand started to jerk for a gun. But he arrested the movement before it got under way. He turned to the Eighty M buckaroos.

"You fellers come and hear what I have to say to the boss. You, too, Miss Temple."

Without waiting to see who accepted the invitation, he headed for the big house. Mr. Morton had Uncle Ramsay turn up the light when so many people came tramping into his bedroom, with Zeke at their head. The boss met Zeke with, "I been a-smellin' ether. What's comin' off around here?"

"Shorty's arm just came off," Zeke blurted the whole thing out. "And Johnny Milton lays out there in Smoky Saddle, not buried yet. Starr whupped

hell outa me, and then they shot up the boys till they had to run."

"And them nesters got through?" Little Welty cried, pushing onto an elbow.

"With seven thousand head," Hub put in. "They're on Goose Creek tonight."

Zeke's miserable eyes came to rest on a lovely face framed by two heavy braids of gold. He was looking into two lovely dark eyes that had lost some of their dreamy warmth because they were so very serious.

Mary Temple stood in the doorway, with no apology to anybody for coming into this enemy stronghold. For a moment Zeke forgot everybody else about them. Mary was telling him something. Her lips were not moving; she stood stock still. But something leaped across that ten feet of space between him and her. It was as if an invisible bond had been spun between them then and there, something that would hold between them forever and forever.

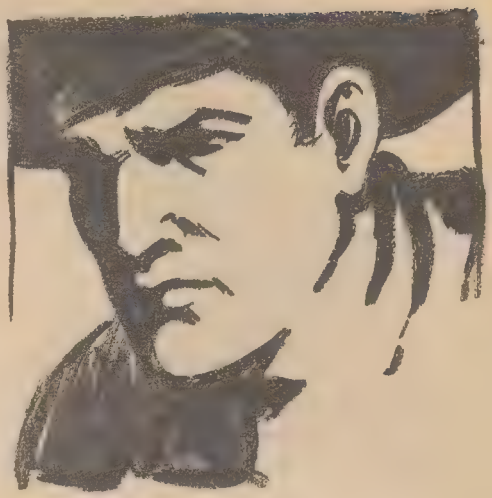
Zeke became aware of Nellie's tug at his arm again. She was drawing him toward Little Welty's bed.

"Zeke asks for just three days," Nellie declared to Morton, "to throw every nester and milkpenner back through Smoky Saddle. They got the jump on him once, but—"

Zeke stopped her with a firm grip on her shoulder. He pushed her back, so that he came face to face with the old man who had been a father to him.

"Nellie's only wish-talkin' boss," he loosened his tongue again. "I'm through! Whipped! You couldn't give controllin' interest in this ranch to a bird like me, boss. I come here with nothin' and I'm clearin' out with nothin'. It shore hurts, boss, to lay down on you, but I'm just no good here any more."

Zeke never forgot the look on Little Welty's face. He did not believe it possible for a man to be hurt that much. An inch at a time, Little Welty pulled himself onto his elbows. Nellie ran in to assist him but he did not seem to notice her.



HUB BUELL

Zeke set his teeth for the withering words that were to come pouring out at him. He deserved it all. Little Welty had a vocabulary, seldom used, that could almost cut a man's heart out. He was not saying anything just yet, but those penetrating eyes were boring into Zeke's. A sort of defiance began to flare up in him when Little Welty still did not speak.

"Get it over with!" he exclaimed. "Go ahead, I can take it!"

"Well," the boss began, and his words were clipping like steel blades, just as Zeke had expected, "you shore have made a fine foreman for me! Licked to a frazzle the first time you head into a gang of nesters! A quitter! A soft, mealy-mouthed quitter!"

His gaze flitted for a moment to Mary Temple. Zeke knew that the girl had been to see the boss three times, to try and talk him into giving up range to her faction before she left with him an ultimatum of the invasion. The keen blue eyes shifted back onto Zeke's face and dug so deep that Zeke feared the old man might even discover that queer feeling that had passed between him and Mary only a moment before.

"Nellie," Little Welty said at last, to everybody's surprise, "look in that old rawhide trunk there, down in the

bottom, right-hand corner. Hand me that little leather bag, the Indian-beaded one."

While Nellie obeyed, a strained quiet came to rest on the room. Uncle Ramsay somberly glided in to prop the old man up with pillows. Nellie rummaged nervously. Then she came up with an old beaded bag that had been moulded and stained with rain. With reverent fingers Little Welty took from it an old tintype picture. He held it out to Zeke. The buckaroo looked at the faded likeness of a young woman who wore bangs and a tight-fitting waist with high collar and old-fashioned sleeves that puffed up on the shoulders. Her face was delicate, beautiful.

"Now come and look at my back, Zeke. Take my nightgown loose, Ramsay. No, cut it loose, you black devil."

Grinning his appreciation of Little Welty, Uncle Ramsay drew a knife and laid the old man's shoulders bare. Zeke stepped nearer. Then he looked on something he had never dreamed existed. The scars of a running iron laced back and forth across the small, yellowing back. Many scars, until they made a cruel network.

"When I drove my first herd into this basin," the old man said, his voice not so sharp nor loud now, "outlaws had it without dispute. Stage-coach robbers, rustlers, murderers. I started in to fight 'em. My cowboys got cold feet and quit me. The outlaws caught me and demanded to know where I had buried sixty-three thousand dollars that they knew I'd inherited. They burned my back like that to make me tell. And I did tell. I couldn't stand the hot irons when they rubbed 'em across the soles of my feet!"

Little Welty flashed a look about, as if he would defy anybody for weakening so long ago under torture. Then he added, "They would've killed me after they got my money, if it hadn't been for a trick a young lady pulled. She was the niece of the shyster lawyer that kept the outlaws outa the pen—that girl there on the tintype. I loved that girl. But after my back got burned like that and I give up my money and I went broke after they run me outa the basin, I never tried to hunt her up no more. She went back to Ohio and died of fever.

"But she wrote me a letter and told me to swallow my pride and come after her. That was the biggest half of my job, and I never tackled it."

The old man's voice fell away until it was only a murmur. There was infinite pathos and longing in his recital of the love story that had its last chapter written here before the eyes of his awed listeners. Pride had blighted that romance of another generation. Zeke knew it hurt Little Welty to tell of it. But the old man had gone through with the recital to drive home an idea.

Little Welty did not need to tell of the lesser half, as he termed it, of the overwhelming task that had faced him after he was run out of this basin, with raw back and empty pockets. Few had ever heard of the scarred back. But all of those present had heard how he had gathered new strength after his defeat by the outlaws, and returned to this basin to begin a fierce struggle against the entrenched gang that had humbled him so ruthlessly and left him without a penny of his inherited wealth. He had killed seven of that gang, four of them with his own Colt.

Little Welty rested against the pillows a moment, but he kept those merciless blue eyes boring at Zeke. Zeke faced him again and took a deep breath. Things were different with him. He could not fight with all his heart for Little Welty and he certainly was not going to fight against him.

Again, though, Little Welty seemed to read his thoughts. "I told you, Zeke," he said, "that I meant to hold this stock certificate until you proved yourself worthy of the Eighty M."

"And," Zeke replied, "I told you I didn't want it—not bein' able to meet the terms."

Little Welty laughed. His eyes softened. He pulled from beneath his pil-

low a legal paper that had a gold edge around it. This he held up so Zeke could see it.

"Boy, the same offer still holds," and he actually smiled. "I'll keep this certificate right here under my pillow till you prove up for it. Now get in there with both feet and fight."

Zeke's head swam. No bitter denunciation. No disgust in him. Instead, the old man still had faith in him! But Zeke felt that Little Welty still wanted him to keep the ranch an entity by marrying Nellie. Nellie was hugging his arm.

"Oh, Zeke, I'm so happy for the way it's all turning out," she exclaimed. "Thank you, Mr. Morton, for giving us this chance. We'll make good on it, too. You see if we don't."

Zeke's face grew redder and redder. He wanted to tell this girl and the old man that he never could take her as a life partner, not even for Little Welty Morton. But he had an innate gallantry that made him refrain from hurting the young woman and crushing her pride. The only way not to do that was to clear out, and he was going to do that anyway.

"I can't live it all down," he forced out to Little Welty. "I'm good for nothin' but to drift. Not even good enough to hold out my hand to you, boss, as I go. *Adios!*"

Zeke strode slowly for the door, his heart crying out against this thing. Little Welty's faith had stirred in him something that had been asleep. Not just fighting blood, but the *will* to fight for success and for principle. A will that could not be broken by one whipping or two or three.

"Zeke!"

It was a soft word. It came from the full, rich lips of the young woman who still held her ground there near the door. Mary Temple had fought her own fight while Zeke fought his. But she had won, while he lost. Now she knew one thing very definitely, painful as the discovery was. This range fight had been started to break Old Man Morton. Now it was breaking the spirit of a young man, and that spirit was worth more than all the grass and cattle that ever grew in Morton basin!

The power of that belief shone in Mary's eyes as they challenged Zeke's imploringly. Zeke refused to look into those rich, dark depths. He kept his gaze on a long braid of golden hair that hung down over a firm, delicate curve.

"Zeke, why don't you stay and fight?" she said. "I know all the odds, but there's still room against them, for a man."

Mary Temple's words only added to Zeke's bewilderment. Why was she urging him to stay and fight her own people? Nellie was quick to supply an answer. She took sharp strides across the room.

"Zeke, don't you see," she said, "that Miss Temple is poking fun at you? She wants you to stay and fight because she thinks you'll be the easiest man to whip again! Zeke, stick here and fight her opinion hotter than you fight the hired gun-slingers that Starr has waiting on you."

Zeke did not answer Nellie. He had nothing more to say to anybody. He passed out the door, more wretched and ashamed than he ever dreamed a man could be.

Neither did Mary Temple reply to Nellie's accusation. Her heart was stirred by a force that she herself hardly understood. She was to realize later that it was Zeke Lancaster's stark strength of soul, his magnificent spirit, that moved her so deeply. She felt the towering might of the man as Zeke himself had felt the bigness of the thing that Little Welty Morton stood for. She went across to Morton's bed, and there was about her not the least trace of animosity.

"Don't you help to destroy that man," she whispered. "Keep your faith in him, and so will I."

With that, she left the room. Little Welty glared after her with puzzled inquiry.

That look was still there when he turned his face to the wall and closed his eyes. The twitching at the corner of his mouth betrayed the old man's anguish. He was trying to see his way through a fog of rushing events. He was weighing men as he saw them, and two girls. But Nellie Shattuck's spell over him still held.

The people in the room stood about in awkward silence, expecting Little Welty to turn to them and speak his mind. Nellie's breath came hard; tiny lines became visible at the corners of her mouth. Hub Buell's eyes burned on her, as if he were trying to fathom the depths of the girl's heart. The Eighty M cowboys looked uneasy and anxious.

It seemed a long time before Little Welty twisted his time-scarred face to the room. His eyes sought Nellie, then Hub. One of the Eighty M riders cleared his throat nervously.

"Hub," Little Welty began, "you'll take charge of the ranch, as temporary foreman."

Buell's ashen face did not light up much at the appointment. That word temporary stuck in his craw. It as good as pronounced him unfit, if there had been a stronger man available. He forced a smile, however. He could not afford to throw away a hundred and fifty thousand dollars by telling an old man what he thought of him.

"All right, Welty," he said. "From now on you'll find me right in there fighting."

The cowboys lingered briefly after Buell went out. Tood Graham looked as though he might be considering a protest against Buell's appointment. But he gulped hard and turned abruptly. The clump of the boots that followed him sounded hollowly through the bedroom. Dull, ominous sounds.

"You stay here," Little Welty requested Nellie.

Alone in the room with Little Welty, Nellie thanked him again and again for his benificence toward her. "But," she confessed, "it means nothing to me unless Zeke can share it with me."

"I don't quite think Zeke is whipped," the old man declared. "He might think he is. He'll even likely ride off and stay a few days. But he's got to come back, girl. There's where I put strings on the four hundred and ninety shares I'm givin' you. You don't get this gift, not even a single share of the corporation, unless you bring Zeke back here, make him fight and win!"

"I'll do my best," the girl murmured. "Not for the money, Mr. Morton, but for Zeke's sake. I do love him so."

Little Welty patted her dark head soothingly. But there was a trace of a doubt in the faded old eyes. Perhaps he himself did not know what he doubted. But that doubt was reflected in his emphatic repetition to Nellie of the only terms by which she could come into possession of the rich gift.

"Remember, I've got to see Zeke back here ramroddin' this spread hell-bent for leather, and every nester kicked back through Smoky Saddle, or I'll have to conclude that you ain't strong enough to be part owner of this ranch. I'm powerful proud of my old Eighty M, girl, and I want to leave it in strong hands."

"What will you do with it if I fail—and Zeke fails?" Nellie asked.

The question brought visible pain to the old rancher's face. He flashed Nellie a searching look. Then he closed his eyes in thought. It was a full minute before he finally said, "Zeke won't fail me. I feel it in this old heart that won't beat much longer. Your share—that depends on how you help the boy."

The muscles in Nellie's face seemed to go taut. Fear crept into her eyes. She had caught the doubt that the old man could not hide, and she must have known by his words that it no longer could be construed as doubt of Zeke.

Nellie kissed the old man's forehead hurriedly, then she went out to find Zeke again. She could not let him get away from her.

Zeke was gone. Nellie looked for Mary Temple. She also was gone.

Fear gripped at the young woman's heart until she could not speak to bald Jerry Mann, of whom she started to make inquiry. With effort, she got herself under control.

"That Temple girl is up to some trick, taking Zeke off like that," she declared.

"Zeke went one way and she went the other," Jerry informed her. "It'd be a good thing, though, if Zeke would talk her over to our side. We'd have the nesters half whipped then."

CHAPTER V

Runaway Buckaroo

HE WAS running away. It was like bitter gall, but Zeke Lancaster kept his horse headed south toward Smoky Saddle. A three-quarter moon was up, but now and then it was obscured by clouds in the sky. Zeke tried to fight back the hard accusations that rode with him as persistently as his shadow on the ground.

Quitter! Coward! Disloyal wretch!

The accusations stung and burned into his soul. He stopped his horse once and looked back. No, he couldn't go back. He was a failure anyway, and to return would only hurt and humiliate a young woman more than he cared to do.

He rode on for another three miles. Stopped again, fought the same brief battle. Once more he ribbed his horse on for Smoky Saddle.

But the battle still raged in his heart. Coward! Quitter! No sense of loyalty. Afraid of entanglements! He halted his horse and once more scanned the backward trail with eyes that bore the anguish of his struggle.

Pow-ow-ow!

The cry of a rifle rang out through the canyon and echoed back from cliff walls. Zeke's right side jerked backward a little and something stung hot through the lung. He snatched his Winchester from saddle boot and leaped off to flatten himself on the ground.

Pow-ow-ow! That ominous cry again, from a distance of only sixty or seventy yards. The bullet zipped over Zeke's head and ripped up dirt from the badger hole at his right. Zeke squirmed around and got behind the badger's hump of earth, facing the direction from which the last shot had come. He could feel a warm spread on his back and breast and he began to grow sick from the wound. He coughed, spitting red.

The third bullet struck a rock in front of Zeke, smashed half flat and glanced upward to smack against Zeke's forehead. The blow was too high for the bullet to penetrate the skull, but Zeke's senses whirled dizzily.

He had been watching, though, when the rifle muzzle spat out its venomous flame. He caught sight of a thin flash from the side of a big bullpine. It might have been a brass button, a worn rifle bead. He tried frantically to hold onto his senses and fire at that spot. He got his rifle swung onto the immediate vicinity. Then he went blind and his mind began to grow blank.

Through sheer will power he fought back to consciousness, got his sight back. He triggered at a second flash he saw; a bare glint. The next instant he heard the gallop of hoofs. The horse was coming toward him. He tried to twist about, to face the new enemy. With pure grit he fought back the wave of darkness; held onto his wits. But his body slumped down while he made the effort.

A cloud brought its dark shadow scudding over the canyon. A gray timber wolf let out a long, weird howl from a ridge point not far away. It had smelled blood and this was its hunting call.

A man behind a big bullpine peered down the canyon, trying to make out the identity of the rider on the horse that was galloping up. When he saw

golden hair in a flash of moonlight, a curse fell from his lips. But he was not to be stampeded. He swiped a foot over the ground where he had stood, not to leave a single mark of his boots where he had stood. Then he jammed his big black Stetson onto one of his feet and went skulking off through the pines.

The foot with the hat on it left only a dim flat imprint, and he put the other boot down only on rocks, logs and dead branches. The buckaroo was not coming after him. The girl had reached him now, and was off her horse beside him, calling anxiously:

"Zeke! Zeke! Wake up!"

The killer skulked on safely into darker timber, telling himself with satisfaction, "He'll never wake up!"

But Zeke's heart still beat. Mary Temple held her ear to his left breast until she made sure of that. Then she ripped open his shirt, found a match in his vest pocket and by its light examined his wounds.

A small round hole had bored through the right side of his chest, a little to the outside. The fresh red gleamed malignantly against white skin and black hair. The bullet, evidently a plain lead one, had come out between two ribs at the back, leaving a hole only a little larger than the one in front. On his forehead was a red stain, but she saw that here there was nothing worse than a severe bruise.

She was startled by his whisper: "I'm O. K., Mary. Was afraid to speak before—but now dry-washer gone. Hear!"

From back on the ridge above them had come the sound made by a horse blowing through its muzzle. Then the crack of a dry limb which horse or rider struck in the ride through the pines.

"Not able fight 'em now," Zeke confessed, using only a minimum of words to avoid coughing if he could.

"Who was it?" Mary asked.

"We might never find out," he answered.

Mary forgot that she was of and for the nesters. Gone for the moment was all her hatred of Eighty M riders. With her eyes on the red splotch that smeared the buckaroo's bare breast, she wanted vengeance on the would-be murderer.

"I'm going to pack this bullet hole, then go back to the Eighty M for Dr. Myles," she told him. "You're not able to be moved. I'll have them fetch a tent back and set it up over you. Keep still and avoid coughing if you can."

A few minutes later she set off for the Eighty M. Queer thoughts rode with her. Guilt settled deep in her heart. She had helped to put the seven thousand head of cattle on Goose Creek. But she feared that she had done it at a very high price. Zeke Lancaster had made her see that Little Welty Morton had rights that were as strong and fine as any moral justification she had argued for the invasion of the Eighty M range. She had helped to trample those rights.

Then, too, came the deepening conviction that she had destroyed a man's spirit. Like Delilah of the Bible, she had shorn a man of his power, and Zeke Lancaster was a Sampson among the men around him.

Mary's distress grew with a mounting fear that Zeke might not even live to make a fight of it. Her usual calmness began to break. She was only a girl, not quite nineteen. Things had rushed upon her in a bewildering whirl the past ten hours; she felt torn away from all her former bases of reasoning.

Turmoil grew in her heart when she reached the Eighty M. She decided, though, not to tell Mr. Morton about Zeke's being shot; it might kill him. She went to the long bunkhouse, where she found Hub Buell, Nellie and half a dozen Eighty M riders on the long front porch. Dr. Myles was inside, with Shorty. When Mary broke the news, Nellie leaned against a porch post for support.

Hub Buell pounced upon Mary with: "Your nester crew shoots Zeke from the saddle, and then you come here to cover it up! Like as not, you lured him out to

where they could put a bullet through him. Zeke had gone loony about you—anybody could see that."

At Buell's accusation, Mary's hand came flashing up, but she managed to halt its hard drive before her palm reached his cheek. Buell took a backward step nevertheless. When Mary did not follow him, he glanced at Nellie. His last remark had been for the ears of the poverty-weary daughter of the blacksmith.

Buell was going to make a fight for Nellie's love. He had never fought before, so nobody knew what sort of an antagonist he would make. Buell was bareheaded; sweat had matted his blond hair to his forehead a little. He had a long head and sharp, thin face. There was a fresh scratch across his left cheek. That could have been put there during a ride through the woods.

"How long have you been back here?" Mary suddenly shot at him.

"Back where?" he parried.

"Back at this ranch."

"What're you drivin' at, woman?"

"That *you* shot Zeke Lancaster!"

The words were out before Mary had time to consider their advisability. Nellie leaped to her feet. Whatever her faults, she loved Zeke passionately.

"Yes, where have you been?" she demanded hotly of Buell. "I haven't seen you since Zeke left, till you walked in the door only minutes ahead of Miss Temple. Any of you boys seen him around?" Nellie demanded of the dejected Eighty M crew.

Nobody said a word. Nellie ran inside, and Mary could hear her tell Dr. Myles to grab his saddlebags and go with her. Nellie came back on the run.

Nellie was beside herself with fear and rage. To her credit, she did not fly into a tantrum against Mary. But she gave the girl from the nester gang to understand she was not wanted out with Zeke.

Buell stepped up to Nellie and seized her by the shoulders. He shook her until she must have been dizzy. "Listen, girl," he said, and his words burned with bitter passion, "I've got only one stake in all this fight. That's you. After the smoke is all cleared away, I'll have you, too. You can't get away from me. Hear! You're mine!"

Mary shivered. She thought that, if Buell had not tried to murder already, he would kill any man, in fair fight or foul, who tried to come between him and Nellie. Nellie seemed frightened by his hot words. She backed away from him and then went running to the corrals for a horse.

CHAPTER VI

Grass Barrier

EIGHT days later Mary faced Homer Starr across the cook's rain-battered fire. Starr's black slicker and Stetson seemed to lend bulk and might to his powerful frame. His yellow eyes glowered defiance at Mary. He knew it was showdown time with the girl who had shared authority with him on the way through Smoky Saddle.

Men with tin cups and plates in their hands stopped to listen to the expected clash between Starr and Mary Temple. A few bedraggled women moved nearer, one with a baby in her arms. Starr was hard to withstand. He was on fire with success, and that fanatical gleam in his eyes burned hot.

"It's been raining almost steadily for five days, Homer," Mary summed up briefly her argument. "Grass will be good by the time we can make the return drive to our home ranges. Our stock can feed back gradually, not to lose the good flesh they've put on since they hit Goose Creek."

Starr let a smile of amused incredulity touch his red, clean-shaven face.

"Do you actually mean, Mary," he demanded, "that you want us to get out and give up this range that we've risked our lives to take? Girl, our children's blood might have been spilled in this conquest."

"Let's talk facts, not what might have

been," Mary replied. "When we started in here, it was understood that we were coming to take grass to save our herds. I never dreamed that we'd do anything else but go back, after our cattle were safe."

"But," Starr told her, "another drought will come and then what will we do? If we let the Eighty M get back strong on its feet, they'll come and run us out of all Morton basin, no matter who the ranch finally goes to. No, we're goin' to play safe and wipe the Eighty M clean off the face of the earth! That was my mission and I'm bein' true to the call."

Starr lifted his voice to triumphant tone, and made a wide sweep with his right hand. He whirled on the men who had come crowding up. A few huddled off to themselves. Mary knew these were the sturdiest of character, the honest ones on whom she could count to do the right thing.

Starr's own hired force, now grown to sixteen riders, made him seem too formidable for anybody to stand in his way. His eyes flamed hotter than they ever had. He made Mary feel that he actually looked upon himself as a savior for Morton Basin. Yet she realized that greed was seated deep in the man's heart. Greed also was making it much easier for the milkpenners and nesters to follow him.

"Friends, neighbors," Starr cried, "do we truck our tails and run like whipped curs? Or do we stay in here north of Smoky Saddle and reap the fruits of the victory that we have right in our hands?"

The invaders had the Eighty M on the run, no denying. Hub Buell had not made any real stand against them. Buell had contented himself with a few long-distance volleys, then retreat before Starr's rushes.

Murmurs of approval came from many lips as Starr made the appeal. Whatever greed many have lain deep behind Starr's zealous attack upon Little Welty, for the time being he was willing to share his gains with all his followers. That kept them believing in him and willing to stick by him.

"What I propose to do, men," Starr shouted, "is to push our herds this morning right on up to Porcupine Plateau. Have you seen that belly-high grass up there? Next week we'll drive the Eighty M cattle ahead of us and march on down onto Bob's Creek. It's ours! All ours just for the taking, friends!"

The man's dangerous fire swept into the breasts of his henchmen. Their faces glowed with the picture of their new wealth. More than half these little fellows were expert with long loops, with brand burning and with the "sleepering" of calves. The Eighty M herd would dwindle away rapidly, once they got into it.

"Let's git on the move, Homer," cried runty, red-whiskered Buzz Wickline. "We're goin' ahead, not backward."

Wickline squirted tobacco juice through a yellow mustache and looked at Mary with open defiance. He'd had enough of her preaching.

"A range war is a range war," he spoke directly at her, "and the chicken-hearted better clean out."

Mary stepped back so she could command a view of the entire gathering. Her face had gone pale, but the fire in her dark eyes matched the flame in Starr's yellow ones.

"I beg you people," she cried, "not to do this awful thing. Morton has his rights the same as we have. If you go on now and take this range and—and steal his cattle while he lies there dying, not a man of you can ever look the world in the face again. Let's go back to grass that's shooting up for you at home. Let's live and let live and—"

"Listen, woman, you said it," Starr broke in. "We're livin' today and next year and ten years from now. Morton can live on the money that he's got piled up. Only this week he handed over one hundred and fifty thousand dollars to Hub Buell, after they delivered the beef herd to the shippin' pens. Let's vote

on it, men. All in favor of livin' and let live like I say, step over here."

Starr shifted off to one side with the confidence of a man who knows he has won. Every one of his hired men followed after him, of course. With them went the nesters and milkpenners. They kept on crossing over, one at a time now, until only three were left.

Starr fastened his gleaming eyes on the three. They squirmed under his stare, but they held their ground. Starr did not threaten them with words, but Mary thought that the man would have liked to crush them into the earth with his heel.

"All right," Mary said resignedly to the distressed trio, "we'll take our cattle and turn back."

"You're not goin' to chouse our cattle around to do any cuttin'," Starr ruled quickly. "You can go—yes, get out! But nary a hoof turns back."

The three threatened men put their heads together. Mary joined them, before they weakened.

"There are things worth more than cattle and grass," she pled with them.

"But we got our families to think about," one said dolefully.

"Weaken now," the girl flashed, "and your families will be ashamed of you the rest of their lives."

"That's right," agreed Henry McGill, the strongest of the trio. "Let's clean out and trust to Starr to get our cattle back later. He's a queer mixture, and mebbe his better nature will prevail for us."

"I'm afraid greed will smother that better nature," Mary had to say. "I don't look to get one cow back if Starr wins this fight."

They got to their horses and rode away. Some of the coarser nesters hurled jibes at them until they were out of hearing.

"Now what?" McGill asked, a mile away.

"You men can't go that far with me," Mary said, "but I'm in sympathy with Morton from here on."

CHAPTER VII

Dark Days

MARY TEMPLE headed her horse for the little tent that she had seen put over Zeke, in Turkey Draw. She got there in a drizzle of rain, and found the tent still in place. But there was no sign of life about it. The cook's fire had been rained out at least a day earlier. The cot was gone, everything but the mildewed tent.

Fear gripped at the girl's heart. Zeke Lancaster was dead! She could put no other interpretation upon it. She had not heard from him for three days, and the last word had been that he was delirious, in the crisis.

"Maybe, though," she consoled herself, "he got able to be moved back to the ranch."

Knowing well how little she was wanted back at Eighty M headquarters, she nevertheless rode that way. And never had she felt so wretched and alone in the world. The rain began to blow into her face; it soaked through her old slicker and made her woollen shirt soggy and heavy. She was drab, wretched, sick of heart.

Nellie Shattuck met Mary on the front porch. For a moment the two girls looked into each other's eyes without speaking. The flashing, challenging blue ones of Nellie and the dreamy dark pained eyes locked and measured, challenged and defied. There was suffering in Nellie's eyes, too.

"How is Zeke? And Mr. Morton?" Mary inquired.

"Mr. Morton is still fighting like a man," Nellie answered. "But Zeke—he's gone."

"Gone where?" Mary exclaimed.

"Left the country," Nellie said dejectedly. "As soon as he passed the crisis and took a turn for the better, I had to leave him for a few hours and come to see about Mr. Morton. Yester-

day, I left Tobe Vinson with Zeke. But Zeke made an excuse to send Tobe off for something. When he got back, Zeke was gone. His fever had gone down, but he was by no means saddle-able. He made it to town, all that hard ride, just in time to catch a train west. That's all we know about it."

"Hey," came a croaking voice from within, "fetch that young lady in, Nellie."

Nellie did not like the summons. She stepped to Mr. Morton's door and said something Mary could not catch. Little Welty repeated his demand. Mary went into the bedroom, which opened off the main front porch.

Little Welty's face was thinner, his eyes stamped deeper with suffering. He did not say anything for a long time when Mary stood before him.

"Got any notion where Zeke went to?" he at last asked Mary.

"Of course she hasn't, Mr. Morton," Nellie resorted to her trick of answering for others. "How could she know?"

"Oh, thought mebbe she might," and the old man smiled up at Mary so benignly that she smiled back, faintly.

"Well," Little Welty declared, "I'm still hangin' on here and waitin' for the boy to show up—with guns in his hands. Gawd knows I need somebody with guts to fight. I might as well have an old woman ramroddin' my spread as Hub Buell, from all I can gather!"

It came over Mary just then that it was odd about Buell. He was not the kind of man to keep running without a fight. He at least might have been expected to put on more men and send them into a battle with Starr, even if he were afraid to get in and expose his own hide to flying lead.

"Yes," Mary replied, "you need a fighter in the saddle, Mr. Morton. Starr is moving his cattle onto Porcupine Plateau today, and down onto Bob's Creek next week."

Little Welty studied Mary Temple's face long, searchingly, half afraid of her.

"It ain't in you, girl," he finally said slowly, "to ride in here with some trick to play on an old dyin' man. How come you quit Starr?"

"Difference of opinion, after the rain brought grass back home."

"Good!" That one word burst from Little Welty's lips with real delight. It said that he approved of the Mary Temple who stood there before him bedraggled and alone. Nellie was quick to catch the old man's change of heart toward the other girl.

"You couldn't by any chance," Nellie shot at Mary, "have come over to carry out any particular scheme against the Eighty M, could you?"

The question had some justification; Nellie did not share Morton's faith in the girl who was changing sides. It nevertheless carried the sting of personal malice. Nellie was fighting for every inch of advantage, in her own way. Little Welty appeared not to notice Nellie's attack.

"You believe," he asked Mary, "that Zeke will come back and put up a fight?"

Mary hesitated. Would Zeke come back? Would he fight if he did get back? Little Welty, the girl saw, was living for just one thing, Zeke's proof of the stuff that was in him—the fighting stuff. Mary told herself that. Then there came sweeping over her greater faith in the absent buckaroo. Zeke Lancaster was loyal and he had courage. She knew it. It had to bring him back.

"Yes, Mr. Morton," she came to her answer, "I feel that Zeke will come back and come fighting."

Little Welty smiled warmly at her. Faith in Zeke had become an obsession with the old veteran of the range. He wasn't going to die until that faith had been proved. He held her with another question. While she answered, Hub Buell came in.

"Well," Little Welty told Buell, "you got your work cut out for you today, Hub. This young lady reports that Starr is callin' for a finish fight."

Buell forthwith gave expression to even more vindictive suspicion of Mary

than Nellie had voiced. "What's the trap in it?" he fired at her. "Or perhaps you're tryin' to hone in on that four hundred and ninety shares in the corporation that Mr. Morton is giving Nellie."

It was a hard jab to take. Buell uttered it partly because he was still playing for Nellie's favor. He had not had much success, apparently. But he was not disheartened yet. The man had force and intelligence and he could love hard and hate harder. Mary looked at him now, stalwart in dudish range clothes and handsome even when he scowled. She wondered whether Zeke had in Buell a greater enemy than in Starr.

"Your dirty insinuation," Mary flung back at him, "describes you perfectly, and we'll let it rest at that."

She met the baleful glare of Buell's whitish eyes a moment, then left the room. Behind her she heard Little Welty's low chuckle.

"You asked for it, Hub," the old man said. "We'll plan our campaign on what she reports, too."

Mary, walking on for her horse, felt a return of hope, and began to form a resolution. She was going to find Zeke and *bring* him back. . . .

Day dulled into day, though, and she had not the least trace of the runaway cowboy. Mary was back in her three-room log home, over on Red Buck Creek. From roots that had seemed eaten out two weeks ago, grass had sprung up into a green carpet and there were no cattle to eat it.

Mary kept hearing bad news. Starr was pushing his invasion with fervid zeal. It was clear now that he was going to be satisfied with nothing less than complete ruin of the proud old Eighty M and its dying owner.

On August 3rd he had a slight brush with Hub Buell's men near Corral Butte, then Starr's own herd moved into that area. Four days later he took possession of Hay Creek and put ten hay hands to using Eighty M mowing machines and stackers which he confiscated. It had stopped raining, a help to making hay.

On August 10th Starr had a thousand new cattle moving through Smoky Saddle and his original herd was shifted on to Willow Creek, now only half a dozen miles from Eighty M headquarters. That original herd had swelled in numbers. In spite of his fanatical zeal, Starr was brand-blotting older cattle; unbranded calves of the Eighty M were being sleepered by the score.

Mary met Starr and four of his men in Smoky Saddle, the morning of August 19th. Today she had her father's old forty-four in its stained holster on her hip. She felt assurance because of it.

"You pretend righteous justice in taking this range from Morton," she accused Starr bluntly to his face, "then you turn around and steal his cattle while the poor old fellow lies down there on his death bed!"

Starr looked shamed, in spite of his brazen front. Weeks ago he had made mighty high talk to her about the rightness of this invasion.

In defense, Starr resorted to that often false platitude, "You've got to fight fire with fire. Cattle mean money, and the sooner old Morton is flat broke the sooner this strife ends. As for him dyin', I think he's just layin' up in bed because he's too big a coward to come out and fight me."

That brought a withering retort from the girl. "You're a mighty big man now, aren't you, Mr. Starr? So big they're all afraid of you. Well, there's one man who'll trim you down to your right size some of these days."

"So you're still countin' on that yellow-spined Lancaster, are you?" Starr laughed derisively. "He back in here?"

Notwithstanding his derision, Starr betrayed genuine interest in her threat. And, Mary thought, he did not relish at all the possibility of Zeke's being back in Morton basin.

"I wouldn't be surprised," Mary answered, just to see the effect of it.

She rode on. But she knew she had stretched the truth to make that retort to Starr. She had begun to lose hope of Zeke. He had disapeared on July 20th. He ought to be fairly strong by now, considering the remarkable recuperative powers of a hardy young man of the saddle.

The Eighty M needed a man woefully. Mary wondered why Little Welty kept Buell on as foreman, when he was losing so steadily to Starr.

CHAPTER VIII

Hate Spins a Plot

NOTHER two days forced Mary to the conclusion that Mr. Morton did not know to what a pass his ranch had come. Starr virtually had possession of the entire Eighty M range, except a few thousand acres around headquarters. All the old Eighty M hands had quit; new, untried men were in their places. Mary felt that she was not keeping faith with the old man who had changed his mind and placed faith in her. She was sure that Buell, in order to retain the job as foreman, was making false reports to his boss. Mary determined to go and have a talk with Little Welty.

That was how she happened to top a ridge and see Hub Buell riding alone into territory already overrun by Starr's cattle. Buell had not manifested such courage the last few weeks. Mary decided to keep behind the ridge and watch him.

Within less than half a mile, Buell came onto a Starr hired hand. He waved to the man, then went up and talked to him. Buell gave the rider a smoke. Then the Starr man left him and Buell went on, still deeper into Starr's new territory. Mary kept trailing Buell, even when he crossed the ridge she was on and went down into the next canyon.

Buell came to a small stone house that had been occupied off and on by miners for the past twenty years. He scouted around the place, then went and settled himself in the front door. Mary took her horse well back, then returned afoot. Buell still sat in the door. But he smoked incessantly, as if he were nervous.

Hours passed. Mary remained to watch. The sun was down when her patience was rewarded. Homer Starr came riding up. From her high vantage point, Mary saw him leave six men back where Buell could not see. Then he came riding up to Buell with a cordial wave of the hand. They went inside. Mary crept down to the little two-room house and got up under a window. It was dangerous, she knew, for those six men left back there might have definite assignments.

Inside, Buell and Starr were feeling each other out. Mary guessed that this was their first meeting. Starr made Buell come to the point.

"Well," Buell at last came out with it, "you've had things your way pretty much lately, Starr. Got any guess on the reason you've not met with more opposition?"

There came a brief silence. Then Starr said, "You've just read the handwritin' on the wall and you know old Morton is in the wrong, tryin' to keep honest men off a range as if it was his private kingdom."

There it was again, that zealot's talk. Starr seemed just then to feel a certain sanctity in his cause. Certainly the Eighty M spread feared him too much to make a determined stand.

"You poor fool," Buell laughed at him. "I've let you take this range because Morton handed over to me all I'll ever get out of his wealth, a cold hundred and fifty thousand dollars. The ranch and cattle were to go to Lancaster and Nellie, provided they could keep it and then get married."

Starr whistled softly.

"I see," he said.

The whole thing came rushing through Mary's head. Buell's love for Nellie was a matter of common knowl-

edge; so was Nellie's partiality for Zeke. Buell hated Zeke so he was planning to make Zeke's inheritance worthless by destroying the Eighty M. More than that, Buell probably believed that Nellie Shattuck would not want to marry a penniless Zeke Lancaster. Buell likely knew that the girl craved wealth so hungrily. And he himself already had one hundred and fifty thousand dollars.

"Old Morton," Buell completed the picture, "has humiliated me and discriminated against me long enough. I hate his guts. Now that I've got my money out of him, I want to see him suffer before he dies."

Mary had never imagined that any human could be so ungrateful and revengeful as this. Buell had no reason for it except that Little Welty finally had betrayed favoritism for Zeke, over him. Cold anger crept into Mary's heart. If she had lacked incentive for going over wholeheartedly to Little Welty's side, she was ready to do it now.

"Morton has it coming to him," Starr vowed, as if to ease his conscience for his part in the destruction of a grand old man.

"Swoop down on him," Buell invited. "Don't stop till you've burned the very roof over the old devil's head. I'll put up only a bare show of fight, but it will cost you fifty thousand dollars."

The listening girl could hardly keep from springing up and giving vent to the wrath such a scheme stirred in her. However, she kept glued against the wall.

"Cost me fifty thousand dollars?" Starr echoed. "Why should I pay you for doing you a favor?"

"Because it's worth it ten times over to you," Buell declared. "It's a cold-blooded offer. Take it or I'll show you I can fight, and I've got a dozen more men in the brush to throw at you any hour you ask for it. What's more, Zeke Lancaster is back."

"Lancaster back?"

"Yes, and with some of the most cold-blooded gun-fighters in the country."

"That being true, then," Starr angled for a bargain, "you're trying to throw a pretty mess into my lap, for fifty thousand dollars! You know I don't have fifty thousand dollars, nor even ten thousand."

"Give me five thousand cash and your note for the balance."

Starr tried to get Buell down. Buell held out. They were still wrangling over the price when Mary was startled by a low voice from the brush back of her.

"Take it easy," ordered Buzz Wickline. "Hey, boss, come here."

The little man with red stubble beard had a gun on Mary. Nevertheless, panic seized upon her so completely that she ignored the gun and broke for the nearest corner of the house. She must not be caught, not with information that meant more than a reprieve of life to the man who had stamped his name on this basin. And not with Zeke Lancaster coming back to fight.

She cut around the corner. Wickline did not fire. Mary was running close to the wall. The back door burst open. Buell flung himself in front of her. Mary tried to dodge but Wickline was too close behind her. As a last resort, she grabbed for her forty-four. Wickline made a dive, caught her gun wrist. Buell closed in and seized both her arms. Starr pulled up before her.

"How much did you hear?" he demanded harshly.

"I heard fifty thousand dollars' worth of dirty scheming."

"Well," Buell cried, "it'll be quite a spell before you'll get to peddle one cent's worth of your news. In fact, it'll be worthless when you get loose."

Terror of him began to grip Mary's heart when they pushed her into the rock house. Buell put both arms around her, pinning her arms to her sides. He gripped her to him with unnecessary strength.

"Rawhide her wrists together, Buzz," he ordered.

While Wickline applied the rawhide,

Buell looked down into Mary's face with mocking smile. She had never seen such bitterness expressed in human countenance as that smile betrayed.

"Lancaster ever hold you like this?" he taunted.

"Cut it out, Buell," Starr growled.

"After we decide what to do with her," Buell defied Starr.

Buell put one of his hands over Mary's right ear and crushed her head against his breast. With her hearing thus much impaired, they held a whispered conversation. Then Wickline went over to the one closet of the house, and pulled back the heavy door. Buell shoved her into the musty closet and Starr slammed the door shut. Then they found some nails and used a rock for a hammer to nail the door shut. Mary knew she was meant to be a prisoner for a long time.

While the rock beat on the outside, a cold sweat began to break out on her. Somebody else was in the closet with her! She only felt it at first. She stopped breathing. Not a sound of him, but she couldn't be wrong. Then a hand came out, touched her face. Mary screamed suddenly.

The men outside paid no attention to her cry. They probably thought it was only the expression of a woman's natural fear under the circumstances. Before Mary could cry out again, the hand had clamped over her mouth. Firm, hard, very positive. Mary kicked frantically against the wall, tried to scream out her terror through the hand. But another arm came about her, crushed her in its powerful embrace. The man's lips were close to her ear.

"Don't be afraid, Mary," those lips whispered.

Zeke Lancaster! Mary went weak all over. Her knees almost gave way beneath her. He tightened his grip to support her. Out of one man's arms into another, but what an infinite difference! In the first flush of realization of this Mary yielded unconsciously to Zeke's grip. It was so strong, assuring. And his arms had a strange feeling of authority. Mary knew in that instant that Zeke Lancaster was not the same whipped man who had gone away. Here was the man she had seen beneath his humiliation and shame.

CHAPTER IX

Hard Comeback

THE yielding of the girl's body, slight as it was, brought a mad, wild throbbing within Zeke. Here, in his arms, this lovely young goddess of the saddle! The girl of whom he had dreamed a thousand dreams; who had haunted him night and day and *made* him come back. Her warm, firm body so close to his; his lips touching her small ear.

The old Zeke Lancaster might have withstood the temptation of the moment. The new Zeke could not. A fighter had come back, and he had outlaw fire in his heart. His arms crushed her tighter. His lips found hers. The girl was trying to pull back, to get away from him. He kissed her again, fiercely, savagely. And then she no longer was pulling away. She was giving him her lips.

The hammering had stopped outside. The trio out there had grown silent. So silent that Zeke wondered what was up. In a moment, though, they began to talk, preparing to leave. They listened while Zeke tugged loose the thongs on the girl's wrists. Starr had taken command, apparently.

"We'll nail shut the two outside doors and leave her in here," he stated. "Nobody will come within miles of this place, with you and I doing the directing, Buell."

They began nailing on the outside doors. They gave Mary and Zeke a chance to whisper vital information to each other.

"They don't know I've been hiding here for an hour," he said. "It's not goin' to be very nice, this fight I'm here to make. Personal, I'm goin' to identify

the man who shot me, and kill him just as I would a rattlesnake! Then I'll start in on the ranch fight. Buell has got hold of the right dope: I've fetched in some tough gun-fighters."

He named some of the most renowned gun-fighters of the Northwest. Every man of this quintet had fought fair and aboveboard. True, three of them had been on the outlaw trails when they were younger. But circumstances had been against them, and they had come back to the standards of justice that the rough Frontier understood and approved.

"Five men aren't enough," Mary told him.

"Of course not. I've picked up six of the old Eighty M hands that Buell fired. It's funny that I could get six of 'em to believe in me again."

"I'd hoped for it," Mary told him.

It was still great odds in man power. Zeke had an even dozen including himself, against about twenty-six whom Starr commanded, counting nesters and milkpenners. But odds of two to one were not to be shied at when the fate of the Eighty M already was on the block. Starr's superiority in numbers might even mount higher if Buell were to throw his new hired force openly against Zeke, not at all an improbability.

Zeke listened with ear to the keyhole, and heard two horses go walking down the canyon. Wickline, who had stolen up afoot, went with Buell and Starr; Zeke heard him talking as they passed out of earshot. Zeke waited about ten minutes longer, then braced his shoulder against the door.

"She's pretty well nailed," he said. "Take some heavin', I reckon."

He set his shoulder and heaved against the heavy door. It would not yield. He drew back and lunged his weight against it. A nail squeaked, giving away a little. Zeke lunged again and again. The door burst open. He went sprawling out onto the floor. As he went down, he caught sight of a man leaning in the window, gun on him. Hub Buell!

At the same time, the front door flew open. They had only faked nailing it. Framed in its light were Starr, Wickline and several more men. A six-shooter glinted in every man's hand, all on the buckaroo who suddenly froze on the floor as he had fallen. Mary stood paralyzed, in the closet door.

"Smart, but not quite smart enough, Mr. Lancaster," Buell began, teeth showing white with each bitter word. "Your sweetheart got too silent all at once in that closet, and I heard a thud in there that sounded mighty like a holstered gun struck against the closet wall. So I looked around and found something like number eleven boot prints by the door—fresh tracks."

"Smarter than I am," Zeke admitted. "That closet was sure tricky."

As Zeke said that, he gave Mary a flash of his eyes. It might have been only a look of concern about her; yet Mary thought he was trying to tell her something.

"Take his gun, Buzz," Starr ordered.

"Better look out for my pards in the closet," Zeke jibed.

Again came that flash of his eyes. Nothing anybody else might catch, but Mary knew now he was trying frantically to get something across to her. What? Mary was ready to leap at the least thing intuition might suggest. Buzz Wickline paused, while many eyes rolled toward the closet door in which she still stood. They might know full well he had no partner in the closet. He would not have mentioned it if any ally had been there.

"Look in that closet first," Buell nevertheless told Wickline.

It came over Mary all at once that Zeke had mentioned the closet each time he spoke. She whirled back into the dark space. Threw both her hands out in hasty groping. She might have known! Her right hand struck a rifle barrel. She seized the weapon, whirled back. She knew that her action might precipitate a battle that would end in Zeke's death. But he was doomed anyway, after what he had heard of the scheme to wreck the Eighty M.

Mary came out of the closet with rifle swinging up. Wickline, who had been advancing toward the closet door, fell back at sight of the rifle. Mary flashed her rifle on the door and pulled the trigger. One of Starr's men had taken the second step into the room. His shoulder jerked and he fell sideways, red spurting out.

Starr and the men behind him scrambled backwards from the fury of Mary's unexpected attack. Starr struck his head against the door, so hard was he diving for cover. Not from Mary's rifle alone, now, for Zeke had made a desperate grab for his gun the moment he saw what Mary meant to do. And in that prolonged second of the battle's beginning, a wild exultation leaped through Mary's heart. Zeke had given her the chance to die with him or live with him.

Zeke saw a spurt of fire from Buell's gun before he could get his own weapon clear of its holster. But Buell had fired in panicky haste from the window, then he was diving out of sight. Zeke tried to get him as he went down, but his bullet splashed splinters off the windowsill.

Zeke whirled onto the door. The last man was just scrambling out of range. Zeke leaped up. Mary's decisive resort to blazing powder was the only thing that had given him a new lease on life. Starr would rally and lay siege to the house, eventually get Zeke and possibly Mary, too. Zeke, taking his cue from her, risked everything on another bold, swift stroke.

"Out the window," he whispered.

He himself rushed to the door, sprang out. Starr and his men were hardly on their feet again. Starr acted as though he had been knocked half witless. His men were thrown into a fresh panic by Zeke's wholly unlooked-for appearance. Two of them tried to whip guns onto Zeke. The other pair rushed for the corner.

Zeke met gunsmoke with gunsmoke. One of the men firing at him suddenly went down. A piece of his skull had been blown away. The second man came so near doing the same thing to Zeke that a raw furrow turned red across Zeke's cheek-bone. Zeke let him have his second swift shot. The man fell.

Zeke sprang back into the doorway, but he could still see Starr. The invader chief lay on his back, hands in the air. In the swift havoc of Zeke's gun, Starr had lost his nerve. Unable to run as he wanted to, he was throwing himself on Zeke's mercy.

"Get inside, quick," Zeke ordered him.

Starr cast a woeful glance in the direction Buell and his two remaining men had gone. The unbelievable had happened. One man and a girl had whipped seven men, solely through the fury of a cyclone attack. Obeying the admitted victor, Starr came into the house, hands in the air. Zeke took Starr's gun, then turned on Mary. She had not chosen to make her getaway through the window while he kept the enemy pack busy at the door.

Mary was frightened at the look in Zeke's eyes. It was not wild, not murderous, but something more than both. A man who never had wanted to kill now had slain two men. There was no horror of it in those deep-set eyes, no remorse. Just a terrible, pained willingness to shoot as long as any of them wanted it that way.

"You watched this thing once," he said. "I don't want you to see it again. Nor can I risk you leavin' here by yourself. Get there to the door and see that nobody comes to shoot me in the back."

"Lancaster, what're you up to?" Starr cried, terror coming into his eyes.

"I'm goin' to whip hell out of you. That's all for the time bein'."

Zeke reloaded his six-shooter and handed it to Mary. A gleam of hope stole into Starr's face. He had this enemy Lancaster before him, man against man. And Starr was at least twenty pounds heavier. The girl with the six-shooter and rifle could be taken care of with a surprise trick after Lancaster was put away again.

Mary read the situation much as Starr did. She was thrusting the six-shooter back at Zeke.

"Zeke, you're not able to go into a hand-to-hand fight like that," she protested. "You've been laid up with a bullet in your lung."

"I've not forgot that, either," Zeke replied. "I'm liable to lose. If I do, you plug this devil if he makes a single move at you."

Without another word, he started for Starr with deliberate tread. There was a sureness about him, a fearless confidence born of an inward fire. But Mary's heart was sorely tried. He could not yet be quite the man he was before that bullet cut through his lung.

"Zeke, I beg you not to," she implored at the last second. "It's not worth the chance."

"I know what it's worth," he answered.

He did not look Mary's way. She felt helpless, as women must sometimes when men are driven irresistibly to fight. She could not drive herself to go outside as Zeke had requested, and not witness the clash. But she had to watch for Buell and Starr's henchmen. She stopped in the doorway.

Starr had not forgotten how he whipped Zeke before. He met Zeke's deliberate advance with a rush, both fists swinging. Zeke brought over a long, swinging right that could be seen coming a mile away. Starr wanted just that chance. He suddenly hunched his powerful shoulders and rushed under the blow.

But he got the surprise of his life. Zeke had never intended that looping right to land. As Starr rushed in, Zeke retreated just on step. Then he brought his left fist jabbing upward with surprising swiftness. It connected with Starr's unguarded chin, hard and square. Starr's head jerked back. He stopped cold, half dazed.

Zeke did not give him a second to recover. He tore into the man and this time smacked a right to Starr's nose. Blood spurted. Starr rallied and made a desperate effort to get in and get his powerful arms about Zeke. The buckaroo back-pedalled, crossed right and left to Starr's face.

Starr's left eye started to puff up. He rushed Zeke with greater fury. Zeke's big feet danced to keep out of his clutches. Then he dodged Starr's lunge and let him have a solid right swing. Starr pulled up short, unable to keep coming at a man who was dealing out such punishment.

Zeke again refused to let Starr get an easy breath. He went after him with a fury that betrayed the wild urge of his heart. Starr began to stand him off with arms and fists. Zeke bored in. His long arms enabled him to land repeatedly on Starr's suffering face. Starr tried again to rush in and grapple.

Just then Mary saw smoke begin to boil up from the pines not two hundred yards from the house. Buell had set fire to the woods! No rain had fallen for two weeks; winds had dried out the pine needles. Another flame leaped up from the dead, dry top of a fallen balsam. Then a third fire started. Buell might even try to surround them with fire.

Mary started to tell Zeke but Starr had somehow got him. His fingers were fighting desperately to get at Zeke's throat again. He tripped the buckaroo and took him crashing to the floor. And the flames in the woods were beginning to lap toward the tree tops.

Zeke was trying to writhe out of Starr's grasp. Was getting loose—No, Starr's fingers slipped in and got that terrible throat hold again! Mary wanted to cry out the news of their peril from the fire. But she bit down on her lips. Zeke was fighting not just to whip Starr, but to regain something he had lost. Something he had to have back.

Zeke was making a horrible sound as he tried to get his breath through those powerful, murderous fingers. And the fire was coming faster and faster, as it whipped up its own winds. A fourth blaze started, off on the west. Buell

had them half encircled already. Starr was wriggling up onto Zeke in firmer top position. Mary winced. Starr's free fist went crashing into Zeke's face.

Now it was do or die for Zeke. He bridged his long, sinewy body, lifted Starr and himself bodily from the floor. He gave a hard, heaving roll, turned Starr under. He lunged backward from him, tore the punishing fingers loose from his throat.

Then Mary never saw such fury. Zeke got free of Starr and they were coming to their feet. Zeke rushed in and crashed his right to the man's heart. It was like the kick of a mule. Zeke hit him on the chin. Twice, three times! Starr's knees buckled. Zeke let him have another. Starr was falling. Still without mercy, Zeke was churning rights and lefts into him.

"Don't knock him out!" Mary cried. "A fire's surrounding us. Leave him able to take care of himself."

But Starr was out cold. Zeke staggered to the door and swiped blood and sweat from his eyes. One glance at that fire was enough. He whirled onto Mary.

"And you didn't tell," he cried, "till I'd got him licked?"

"I didn't want to stop you," Mary's trembling voice confessed. "But can we get out?"

"There's an old drift mouth out there in the clear spot. This house will go, but we'll not feel it in the tunnel. Reckon you'll have to help me carry Starr to it, I'm so nigh dinked."

They made it to the drift mouth but Zeke's shirt was smoking as he dragged Starr several yards into the tunnel. It did not take the flames long to sweep by. Within twenty minutes Zeke and Mary walked out of the drift mouth behind a sullen, puffy-faced Homer Starr. The inside of the stone house was still burning. The pine woods, however, already were left charred, blackened, smoking.

Luckily, Mary had left her horse over the ridge and Zeke's mount was concealed under a cliff a little further up. The fire had rushed up the mountainside, too fast to spread crosswise over the ridge against the wind. It would burn itself out against the rimrocks above, and an old slide in the mountain would stop it on the west.

"I'll send men to halt it on the slow-burnin' east side," Zeke told Mary.

"What men?"

"Mine—after I'm through with Starr and Buell's combined forces."

Mary's heart leaped. Zeke's raging heart had imparted its fire to hers. Ignoring the snarling Starr, she grasped Zeke's shoulders and stood on tiptoe to kiss him. Starr, awaiting such a moment when Zeke's eyes weren't on him, whirled and dashed into the tunnel.

Mary gasped in dismay and expected Zeke to go rushing into the black mouth after him. But Zeke stood firm.

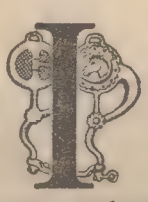
"Let him go," he said. "It might take hours to ferret it out with him in there. Besides, I want to see him play his hand out."

"What will he try?" Mary asked.

"That same raid. Nothin' else will satisfy him and Buell after this, and Starr won't expect me to think he'd do it."

CHAPTER X

The New Boss



IN A camp hidden in the rocky pot-hole section on Goose Creek were the six old Eighty M cowhands and that quintet of famous gun-fighters whom Zeke had gathered together the last two weeks. On fresh horses they started for Eighty M headquarters after Zeke had given them their orders. But Mary turned toward Smoky Saddle.

"You're goin' with me," Zeke ruled.

"Maybe I better not, Zeke."

"Why?"

"I might not be welcome."

"You mean Nellie? You're goin' anyway. She's got to find it out sooner or later anyhow, and I want everything cleaned up together."

Mary swung her horse onto the trail ahead of Zeke. He looked at her slender, shapely body; at the fine, proud head with the yellow braids of hair. A slow, deep joy dawned in his heart. He had to make it possible now for that joy to live on and on and on.

He reflected that his forced detour to Goose Creek had given Buell time to beat him back to headquarters. Starr, left afoot, might be hours in arriving. It was good strategy not to let Buell and Starr unite their forces. Zeke therefore crossed over to Bob's Creek, to cut Buell off in case he started back to meet Starr.

Zeke knew that Buell had lied to Starr when he told him that he had a dozen additional men in the brush. Zeke had been doing a little scouting, while he waited for three of his gunslingers to show up. Buell had nine men, no more.

Zeke rode out ahead of his own force as they neared headquarters. He had made the right guess. Buell came fogging up Bob's Creek, eight men with him. He was in such a hurry to get back after Zeke, in case the latter had escaped the fire trap, that he was taking no precaution at all here near home. Zeke saw them through a strip of pines a quarter of a mile ahead. He jerked his own horse off over the trail and swung back under a cut-bank. He motioned his men down.

Buell was nearly opposite Zeke before the buckaroo lifted his body erect in the saddle and showed head and shoulders above the edge of the cut-bank. His men came up with him.

Buell yanked his horse onto its hind legs. Not a gun was pointed at Buell or his men, but he was turning white. He glanced backward. Something flashed bright on his breast. It was the same kind of thin, brilliant streak of reflected sunlight that Zeke had seen the moment he was shot in Turkey Draw. Buell's diamond stickpin! Zeke's voice went cold.

"Don't try to make a break, Hub," he warned. "We're twelve men to your nine, but that don't tell all. Meet some of my men. First, on the right, the blond gent in buckskin jacket, with the little mustache and mean gray eye—that's Whitey Monroe. He used to be town marshal in Miles City, till they got him fired because he killed too many and took too few prisoners.

"Next, that big lad in the dudish green shirt and brown Stetson, he's Ace Hambrick. Just a kid, you might say, but with four notches on his smoke pole."

"Howdy, Buell," Hambrick greeted. "I've kinder hankered to meet you somehow."

"He makes a right good-sized target," Monroe said.

"Third, the little stubby-nosed hombre that ain't shaved them black whiskers for two weeks, his name's Jed Hanks. Jed was a road agent around Virginia City till he figured it was a losin' game and got squared with the law catchin' that woman-strangler in Butte that time."

Hanks made no move or sound. He just eyed Buell and his gang coldly, as if he calmly were waiting the word from Zeke to be at them. Buell's heavy lips began to sag. This introduction was getting on his nerves. Buell had little real backing. He had not hired fighting men to replace the old Eighty M crew. Instead, he had picked men who would run with him every time Starr pressed them close.

"And on the left," Zeke went on, "sets Lew Beech and Utah Red. Mebbe you heard about what they did to them five train robbers that happened to be unlucky enough to pick the train these two boys was ridin' on.

"You don't need introduction to this half-dozen old Eighty M boys," Zeke finished. "But they look to me like they're powerful sore about the way these new hands with you have scabbed on their jobs. Got any suggestions on what to do about that, Hub?"

"I—I'll take my new men and clean out," Buell stammered.

"Hardly so easy," Zeke ruled.

"They'll show their plumb honest intents by stayin' to fight for the Eighty M. At present, though, it appears to me, Hub, that you mentioned something about a gun-fight with me a few weeks ago. Mebbe we best go through with that matter right now."

"Yeah, you with all the advantage," Buell sneered.

"A plumb worthless excuse," Zeke declared. "Boys, back up a hundred yards, to show I'm not dependin' on you for support."

Zeke's entire force started moving back. Zeke nodded Mary away.

"They can't object to me stayin," she refused. "But I warn your gang, Buell, the first man who tries to double up on Zeke might as well try to get me too."

"They won't try it," Zeke scoffed. "They're wishin' now they were a thousand miles from here. But they hired to the Eighty M to defend it, and this very afternoon I'm callin' on 'em to do some of that defendin'."

Mary looked puzzled.

"Starr is probably comin' again," Zeke made himself clearer. "He wants to burn the roof off Welty's head so he'll maybe set fire to the Eighty M house. These Buell hombres have got to stand at the windows and meet the first rush of Starr's big gang of cutthroats. Then my own boys will take over after the new recruits aren't able to fight no more."

Zeke even smiled at Buell's men, as if to win them over to the idea of laying down their lives for the Eighty M. The Buell hirelings rolled dubious eyes at each other. This thing was getting beyond these hired hands who had been allowed to run when the fighting got hot.

"Now you boys move back," Zeke told them. "You also, Mary. Leave just me and Buell here. Hub once said he had thought I was a man, and I'm invitin' him to stay here with me and see how damn right he was."

Buell's eight men moved back, apparently glad to get out of close range. Buell started to go with them. His hands were trembling.

"You're stayin', Buell," Zeke told him. "You put a bullet through me weeks ago. Now it's your turn to eat some hot lead!"

"It's just some low trick of yours," Buell cried. "I won't stand here and be trapped like this. And I never shot you, Zeke. You know I wouldn't have done that."

For answer, Zeke swung off his horse. He was a hard man to confront just then. His face was still blackened, sweat-streaked and caked with blood. But the blaze in his eyes seemed the most difficult thing for Buell to look at.

"Get down, Buell," Zeke invited. "It's time for a fair, stand-up gun-fight."

"No. I'm goin', Zeke."

"I said get down!"

So imperative was that command that Buell obeyed before he could argue against it. He was begging by the time his boots touched the ground, "Zeke, I can't fight you."

"Then I'm killin' you without a fight."

"No! Zeke, let me off. I'll give you ten thousand dollars cold cash to let me off. I've got it here in a money belt around me, mostly in big hills."

"I'll take the whole belt," Zeke vowed. "Drop it."

"That's robbery," Buell protested weakly.

"Call it anything you like. Drop it!"

Buell dropped the money belt and whirled to run. He was so weak with panic he fell onto hands and knees. He scrambled up but Zeke had him by the collar.

Mary marvelled at the power in Zeke to inspire such terror. He had the same body and the same tongue he had when Starr whipped him and when Buell backed him down. The difference now was in spirit, and Zeke's spirit today was that of a goaded lion that had suddenly torn down its bars and was loose upon its enemies.

"You Eighty M hands over there, come back," Zeke called.

The men hesitated. Zeke made it a positive order. Buell's hirelings came straggling over.

"Buell hired you," Zeke explained, "with no more intention of makin' you earn real Eighty M money than I have of givin' you birds soft spots when the bullets begin to whang into the Morton house. So, it's only fair that the man you really worked for should pay you."

Zeke handed each bewildered rider two hundred dollars from Buell's money belt.

"Now hurry on back to the house," he ordered them.

With queer looks at each other, the men bunched together and took the home trail. Zeke had not even taken their guns.

Buell's belt still remained stuffed. Zeke tossed it back to Buell. "I'll wait to shoot you comin' at me," he promised Buell.

"I ain't goin' to shoot it out with you," Buell said and deliberately turned his back on Zeke. He knew Zeke wouldn't shoot him in the back. "You ain't got anything on me," Buell said. "No call to hold me here."

"I will have if I let you go," Zeke said. "So you'd better hoof it back to meet Starr. The sooner you and Starr cook up something against me the better I'll like it. Go on! Give me proof!"

Zeke let Buell go, and started riding on. Mary rushed up beside him. "But you're doing nothing," she protested, "to keep these eight Buell men from throwing in with Starr."

"They've been scared to death of Starr," Zeke answered, "and they're scared still more they'll have to help defend the Morton house. Besides, each man's pocket is burnin' with that money too bad for him to not streak it for town."

It was so simple a way to get rid of spineless men that Mary had to smile.

"Now we'll shag it on to said house," Zeke finished, "so Starr can give us the nice surprise he plans. I want him to jump me there, so no charge of outlaw doings can be laid against me."

Zeke still had that in mind when he dismounted in front of the Morton home and went jingling his big spurs up to the steps. Nellie Shattuck was there. But she did not run out to meet Zeke. She came out onto the porch slowly, uncertainly, and flashed blue eyes from Zeke to Mary.

"Howdy, Nell," Zeke greeted in strained voice.

He brushed past her and stalked straight into Little Welty's room. "Hello, Mistah Zeke," Uncle Ramsay smiled. "We shoah is been a-lookin' foah you to come back a long time, and bless muh eyes, you'se heah!"

Zeke thought that Little Welty was going to welcome him with equal pleasure. But the old man's face went dark after a few seconds.

"What use do you think this ranch has for you now, when it's in complete ruin?" Little Welty fired at him. "I've never yet put a man back on after he left me in a pinch."

Zeke took rapid steps to Little Welty's bed and thrust a hand beneath the old man's pillow. He brought the hand out, grasping a little bundle of papers. The one on top was the stock certificate which Little Welty had shown him weeks ago. Zeke held the paper out for the old man to see. Little Welty did not look at it; he had his penetrating eyes on Zeke's battle-stained face.

"You told me you'd keep it under your pillow for me," Zeke said, "and I'm takin' you at your word. Now the controllin' interest in this ranch belongs to me. I'm not the foreman, I'm the boss!"

Little Welty grunted his astonishment.

"Starr is comin' to burn the house over your head," Zeke ran on. "I'm gettin' ready to meet him."

"Where's Hub?" Welty asked meekly.

"He's likely tryin' to join up with Starr at this time. His yellow-spined riders are streakin' it for town. I want Buell to come back with Starr. I never

dreamed I'd get hungry for a man's blood like that!"

The last words burst from Zeke's lips almost involuntarily, as a sort of reproof to himself. He seemed startled by what he had discovered in his heart. He went stalking from the room.

"Lawd-amighty," Uncle Ramsay muttered, "if dat boy hain't done come a-fightin', I shoah don't want to meet no fightin' man nevah."

Nellie came hurrying in. Her question showed that she had heard Zeke's words as he took possession of his stock certificate.

"Did he take my certificate, too, Mr. Morton?" she asked.

Little Welty did not seem to hear. He was chuckling to himself, a happy old man even with death so inescapably near.

"And," he said to Uncle Ramsay, "I thought I needed to talk tough to him, to prod him up a little!"

CHAPTER XI

Mary Drops Out

USK was not far away. Still no Starr, not one enemy. Zeke had everything ready, except to remove the big pile of logs that had been hauled up at the south end of the house as a start toward the winter's wood supply.

"Made to order for Starr's riflemen to hug down behind and blast away at us," he condemned the pile. "Better harness up a pair of work horses and jerk 'em out of there, boys."

"Leave them logs right where they are!"

It was Little Welty's deep voice from his bedroom. He had overheard Zeke's order. Zeke strode to his door.

"Have you forgot who's boss here?" he demanded.

Little Welty laughed in Zeke's face.

"You know damn well I am boss here, kid," he chuckled, "as long as I can draw a breath. That's why I wasn't afraid to turn legal ownership over to a lad like Zeke Lancaster. The logs stay right there."

Zeke laughed outright for the first time in weeks. The canny old boss. Still putting faith in him! Who wouldn't fight for such a grand old devil? But Zeke still did not like the idea of the log pile. Too good a breastworks for Starr. Nevertheless he let the old man have his way. Seldom had Little Welty ever been wrong about meeting an enemy. Zeke turned his attention to putting up an extra layer of logs below each window, inside the rooms, to stop rifle balls if they came through.

Deep, somber night settled down. The Morton house waited in tense readiness for the attack. Zeke kept lights burning in order that the place might not appear unnatural. He sat in complete darkness on the front porch, a sawed-off shotgun at his side. That was the most effective weapon for night fighting, and Zeke was in a mood for buckshot hospitality. Three of his men also had these double-barreled shotguns.

In a bedroom upstairs, Nellie Shattuck closed the pine-board door and turned her burning blue eyes onto Mary. Mary pulled down the blind and took a seat on the bed so that she would not be exposed to the window. Nellie halted before her, but not with the belligerency that Mary expected. Instead, Nellie appeared pathetically beaten. She wilted onto the bed and began to cry.

"If you only knew what it means," she finally moaned, "to lose everything in one terrible day!"

Mary was distressed by the girl's grief. Nellie did not accuse her, but Mary felt guilty of the other girl's undoing.

"Mr. Morton," Nellie sobbed anew, "gave me half this ranch, though. It was part of the happiness I'd looked forward to with the man I love—and I do love him so!"

Mary felt mean. She had come between Zeke and Nellie. True, without meaning to do so, but lack of intent did not lessen Nellie's heartbreak.

"But you brought him back and put the fight into him, not I," Nellie wailed, still without condemnation. "You'll marry him, not I. No, you don't have to tell me; I see it. And I'd try to wish you happiness if it wasn't that Zeke ruins himself by throwing me down, and breaks the heart of an old man who has only days to live."

"Were you and Zeke engaged," Mary stammered, "before—before all this started?"

"Oh, of course. Didn't you know?"

"No, I didn't know," Mary murmured.

"It was all arranged," Nellie vowed. "Mr. Morton was so tickled he fixed the papers to give us the ranch as a wedding present. He wanted us to marry so much he fixed it absolutely so Zeke can't have even his share of the ranch if we don't get married."

"Zeke already has the stock certificate," Mary protested feebly.

"But Mr. Morton told me," Nellie replied readily, "that the stock certificate is worthless until it is recorded on the corporation books at the bank. And he's given the bank orders not to make the transfer unless there is a wedding certificate too, for Zeke and me."

By now Mary felt like a rank intruder, almost a thief. Had it been only girl against girl for a man's love, however, she might have stayed and fought it out with Nellie Shattuck. But too many other complications swayed her. She could not remain here and fight against the dying wishes of Little Welty Morton. Nor rob Zeke of a ranch which was worth nearly half a million dollars.

The doom of that decision crept over Mary. She herself remembered one scene at Little Welty's bedside, when Nellie had hugged Zeke's arm in her delight and promised the paralyzed cowman that she and Zeke would make good on his gift of the ranch to them. The absolute reality of that kept Mary from doubting Nellie's words. It was all too much. Mary had to go, and she decided that the sooner she went the better.

With her own face as white as death, she patted Nellie on the shoulder. "You're mistaken, Nellie," she renounced Zeke and the heaven to come. "There's nothing between Zeke and me. To prove it, I'll clear out."

She got up, but she was so shaken she had to support herself by holding onto the foot post of the old spool bed. Nellie never spoke; she seemed afraid to. Mary said, "I—I hope you'll be happy," and passed out the door and closed it behind her. She went tiptoeing down the stairs. She knew where Zeke was. She'd go out the back door to avoid him, and circle to the corrals.

Nellie sat up and looked at the door that shut the other girl out. Then she buried her face in the pillow and cried more bitterly than she ever had before. She was more desperate than she was bad.

"God, forgive me for that terrible lie!" she moaned. "But I'll make him happy."

CHAPTER XII

Red Guns at Last

"SAY, ZEKE," Tood Graham whispered across the the porch, "there's something disturbin' the cavvy."

"I'll see," Zeke whispered back.

He eased off toward the corrals, body bent down low so that no lurking man might skyline him. They had kept up a score of horses for emergency need. These now were milling about as if someone were in the corral with a rope. Zeke peered through the poles. With eyes accustomed to the starlight, he quickly spied somebody putting a bridle on a horse. Zeke cat-footed it around to get the drop on the gent.

But when he slipped through the bars, the intruder was no longer with the horse. Zeke made a cautious search. A dark figure object went tumbling over the corral fence, beneath the overhanging limb of a cottonwood.

By just that much Zeke missed catching Mary. Unable to sight the intruder again, he went back to the house and sent the whispered word around that he had run off a member of the Starr gang. He put a guard on the corral and resumed the watch on the porch, believing that Mary and Nellie were asleep upstairs.

All night long that vigil kept up. Ears strained in vain for the approach of the expected enemies. Two horned owls kept hooting back and forth at each other, but the calls were real and not signals of Starr's band. Up on the high, rough ridge above the house a bull elk whistled his alarm in the night, at some disturbance.

Occasional matches flared about the house, when sleepy buckaroos lit cigarettes. Every two hours Uncle Ramsay stirred in the house, to give Little Welty the medicine that was keeping life in him. But nobody heard the low, subdued sobs of a girl upstairs, as the enormity of her sin grew upon her.

About three-thirty o'clock, dawn began to break. A cool wind was blowing. Starr had not come. Zeke wondered what to do next. He sent three of the old Eighty M hands out to wrangle fresh horses, so the ones kept up all night could be turned loose to graze.

The men had got no more than four hundred yards from the corrals when part of Starr's trap was sprung. Eight or ten men suddenly bobbed out of the brush and confronted Zeke's three riders. The Eighty M buckaroos tried to make a running fight of it. Two of them fell from the saddle within a few seconds. The third, Tony Gail, made it back to the house, arm dangling.

Starr himself led the attackers down within easy hailing distance of the house. But it was the nester Wickline who shouted, "Hey, in there, Lancaster and Morton, I demand that you give up Gail to me."

Zeke did not even reply. The demand seemed so absurd.

"I'm a deputy sheriff," little Wickline proclaimed, holding up a badge. "Tony Gail resisted arrest a minute ago, and wounded one of my posse. Either give up or get ready to take the consequences."

Zeke's big hands gripped tighter on the stock of his shotgun. But he never said a word. He couldn't say anything. Dragging in the law! Cloaking such a wanton raid as this with the garb of law and decency!

Starr had courted the favor of the sheriff all along. More, he had taken pains not to be caught in too flagrant violations of law. Now he had got one of his hirelings appointed as deputy, and the deputy in turn would claim the entire band of attackers constituted a legal posse. Zeke was on the edge of technical outlawry. Dared he make the plunge?

"You might as well know also, Lancaster," Deputy Wickline was shouting, "that I have a warrant for your arrest, too, for the murder of two men in the old rock house yesterday."

A low oath broke from Zeke's lips. He stepped out onto the porch. Wickline did not want to arrest him. He wanted Zeke to resist, so they could destroy him this very morning.

"Starr," Zeke addressed himself to the cunning fanatic back of all this, "why waste any more time? I'll give you what you've come for, a fight. And it's not goin' to be so easy as you think."

"All right, you asked for it," Starr shouted back.

He put spurs to his horse and sped forward. Seven men rode at his back, including Wickline. Five more came came out of cover and rushed to the attack. Then Starr riders came breaking from cover all around. They rushed in on the house, completely encircling it. Starr and seven or eight men made

a hard dash for the pile of logs to which Zeke had objected the previous evening.

"Let 'em have it!" Zeke cried, and stepped back inside.

Zeke's men fired the first dozen shots because they had to. Zeke had lost three men before the attack got started. Now he found that he had only two men for each side of the house and two for each end. Starr's force was all around the place, not less than two dozen of them. But their greatest concentration was behind the log pile in front. From there they poured bullets into the house so furiously that Zeke told the two front defenders not to expose themselves to fire back unless Starr made a rush at the house itself. Zeke feared they would do that any moment.

The rifle bullets ripped through the thick logs sometimes, but beneath the windows Zeke's extra layers of logs stopped the leaden slugs. The guns barked steadily. Zeke abandoned his sawed-off shotgun because it was outranged, and fired his six-shooter repeatedly around the jam of the front door.

The powder smoke puffed faster. Bullets whacked into the house logs and return bullets tore up dirt in a complete circle about the house. The so-called posse was advancing, one at a time running forward from cover to cover, under the incessant fire of their comrades.

Little Welty made Uncle Ramsay put him into his wheel chair and push him out into the big living-room. Not content with merely being in the room, Little Welty took a six-shooter and fired out the open door when he could catch sight of an enemy.

Nellie came running up to Zeke. Her face was white; her eyes red. She handed Zeke a Winchester, and pushed her own six-shooter around the door jamb.

"It's our ranch," she smiled grimly at Zeke, "and we'll fight shoulder to shoulder for it."

"Where's Mary?" Zeke asked.

"Mary? Oh, don't you know? She left here last night."

"Left last night Where to? When did she go?"

"She just slipped away, Zeke."

"Did she tell you why she was goin'?"

"No, she didn't. But I've made a guess. She has wanted to get you back, for Little Welty's sake. After that was accomplished, she had nothing personal to stay and fight for—as I have. Starr had kicked her out of his force, and Little Welty had no use for her here. I haven't done much, but I've at least stuck to my own side."

"Yeah, yeah, you have," Zeke answered vaguely.

His words did not seem real. Nellie did not seem real. She had tried to look him in the eyes as she talked, but only half succeeded.

Zeke fired out the door three times in rapid order, like a machine. He looked about him, at the two defenders pouring hot lead out the window. At Little Welty taking aim again out the door. At the blue-eyed girl. It all seemed unreal, a dream. What were they fighting for, anyway? Zeke ran to the south window. Tood Graham had been hit and was sinking down. Zeke caught the slim buckaroo and eased him to the floor. Blood was coming in little jets from Tood's breast, above the heart.

Zeke stared at that red stream as if he had never seen a man's blood before. Then he leaped up and took his place at the window. A head and half a shoulder showed out over that pile of logs. Zeke triggered. Missed. Triggered fast again. The man's head sank down, never to come up again. Zeke fired at a face behind a blazing rifle. The man's ear and part of the cheekbone were torn away.

For fifteen minutes he fought like that. Fiercely, savagely, deadly. But with no heart. Nellie kept guns loaded for him and others in the room. Sometimes she persisted in coming back to Zeke's window, to fire herself. Zeke had told her to stay away twice. She returned the third time. He seized her

roughly by the shoulder and marched her backward to a chair.

"Now stay there!" he snapped.

Nellie smiled wanly into his face. "Slap me, Zeke. I'd feel better," she said.

There arose a cry at the back kitchen window. Zeke ran for that point. A big rag ball lay only a few feet from the kitchen door, blazing lively because of the kerosene in which it had been soaked. Out a hundred yards away a besieger was twirling another lighted ball on the end of some hay wire. Zeke stared. It was Hub Buell.

Buell let the ball fly. Aided by a favorable wind, it sailed through the air, hit the sloping ground back of the kitchen and came rolling. Zeke fired at the ball, hit it. The tug of the bullet helped to get it stopped before it reached the old wood shed.

They had more such balls out there. One or two or three would land against kitchen or shed, and then the house would go.

"Zeke," Nellie spoke at his elbow, "Little Welty wants you in the living-room."

Zeke went on the trot. Welty nodded at Uncle Ramsay.

"Shoot this fellow for me; I ain't got the brains to do it," Little Welty swore amid the crack of guns.

Uncle Ramsay rolled distressed eyes at Zeke, scratched a woolly head that had grown gray in Little Welty's service.

"I jes' hain't got de haht to do what he says, Mistah Zeke," Uncle Ramsay confessed. "He says foah me to shove him out on de fron' poach, but I know he won't las' long as a snowball in de bad place out deah."

"What has to be done," Little Welty told Zeke, "is too awful for me to give the job to anybody else. I got to do it. I've put it off till there's nothing else left. I sorter seen this whole thing a-comin', even this attempt to burn me out. So I got ready, and stuck an ace up my sleeve. Shove me onto the south end of the porch, and I'll show you."

"I'll take you out effen you bounden and 'termined to go," Uncle Ramsay declared.

He seized the old man's wheel chair and took him rolling through the front door. Zeke followed, Winchester in his hand. Zeke did not protest Little Welty's act. The old boss knew what he was about, and this was a desperate hour that called for any man's sacrifice.

Little Welty made Uncle Ramsay push him to the end of the porch nearest Starr's log barricade. For a moment Starr's men did not fire on Little Welty and the negro, puzzled by such an appearance.

Little Welty yelled at them, "You better open up on me, you mangy buzzards. It'll be the last chance you'll ever git."

They took him at his word. A six-shooter cracked. Zeke killed the man who fired it before the smoke had left his gun muzzle. While the bombardment was going on, Little Welty struck a match and thrust it down by a bunch of dry grass close beside the porch sill. The wind whiffed the match out.

Uncle Ramsay was on his knees, and his lips moved in prayer. But he had Zeke's sawed-off shotgun, and he was letting go with it while he prayed. Then, two bullets hit Little Welty in the lower part of the body, but Zeke did not believe that the paralyzed body felt much pain. Little Welty struck another match. It caught to the grass. Something sputtered into new earth. Only Uncle Ramsay knew what it meant, for he had placed this thing under Little Welty's orders.

Another bullet caught Little Welty in the thigh. But he sat placidly waiting, eyes on the wood pile. Zeke could not let him and gallant old Uncle Ramsay make this last fierce gesture alone. He ran out, pushed his six-shooter up against the corner of the logs and joined his old boss in the bombardment.

Lead stung through Zeke's leg. It was a light wound, though, or he would have fallen. He fired again. A forty-five ball struck the log by his head and

ricocheted, slapping Zeke beside the head until he staggered. He reeled back against the logs, firing twice aimlessly, so near senseless was he. Guns were pouring their fire from the end window, supporting Zeke and the boss all they could.

Then that pile of wood that had served Starr so well suddenly heaved into the air. The earth trembled. Stones fell from the top of the tall chimney. Zeke fell to his knees. All other sounds were drowned out by that terrific blast of dynamite. Men's bodies went flying in all directions. It was a more awful sight than Little Welty had said it would be.

A strange silence fell over the place. Not a gun barked. Starr's mangled body lay within forty feet of the porch. Little Welty looked at it, and shook his head regretfully. Five men had been killed by the blast. Three or four more had been so injured that they were out of the fight.

Zeke's men ran from the kitchen to look upon the havoc of Little Welty's last recourse to save his home. For the moment that left the back side of the house unprotected.

Hub Buell was the first to recover his wits after the explosion. His faction did not have over a dozen allies left, counting all able to fight. For him it was now or never. He called on the men whom Starr had assigned to him, and rushed toward the house with a bucket of kerosene-soaked balls. They lit the balls as they ran.

Zeke thought of such a desperate move barely in time. He got to the back door just as a ball started blazing in the hands of the first man to ignite one. Zeke triggered on the man so fast that the rag ball flew backwards from the man's hands when he gave it the first swing. Zeke's men were at windows and door, backing him up.

Even so, one ball came flaming and roaring through the air. The wind gave it a wider arc. It landed flush against the old shed. Zeke dashed out to hurl it away.

"Well, I'll get you," Buell cried, "and make sure that the house burns, too."

He dropped onto one knee and threw a Winchester up onto Zeke. Zeke fired at him. He knew his bullet went home. But Buell fired. The ball cut skin from Zeke's chin. He pulled on Buell again. The hammer fell on an empty chamber.

Zeke could not take time to reload. He had to get the blazing ball away from the shed within the next few seconds, or the dry shed would go and take the house with it. Zeke dived hard for the ball; seized the flaming thing in his bare left hand and hurled it away. A bullet slapped into the shed by him; then two more. Zeke tore off his Stetson and beat out the fire that was starting against the shed.

The blaze out, Zeke fell on the ground and jammed out one of the empty cartridges from his Colt. His fingers pushed home a fresh cartridge, slapped the gate shut behind it. It seemed so long, so slow. In reality it had been only seconds. He did not take time to put in more cartridges. His life was staked on this one.

His six-shooter came up, steady. Bucked and blazed. This time the ball struck Hub Buell in the forehead. Buell pitched forward. Nine leaderless men took to their heels and got out of there as fast as horses could carry them.

Nellie came running out to Zeke. "We've won, Zeke, dear!" she cried. "They'll never try again to run the old Eighty M off. Zeke, you're shot up! Come in, let me dress your wounds."

Zeke acted as though he neither saw nor heard her. He went out to Buell's body, removed Buell's money belt and staggered back into the house with painful deliberation. He took a handful of fresh cartridges from a box on the floor and then halted in front of Little Welty. Uncle Ramsay, himself wounded slightly, had discovered Little Welty's dangerous wounds.

Zeke dropped Buell's money belt across Little Welty's knees. "Looks like Hub had most all of his hundred

and fifty thousand in there," he muttered. "Reckon he'd taken up his cache, ready for runnin' if he had to."

Zeke started to go. Then he looked back at Little Welty, hesitated.

"Go on, boy, and find your gal," Little Welty smiled, rallying his strength to do so. "I won't be here when you git back, but I'll tell 'em all over eternity what a fight you made, kid!"

He thrust out his hand. Zeke gripped the small, bony right hand that had thrown so many ropes and pulled triggers so many times. He choked up. Then a mist formed before his eyes. He let the hand down gently and turned away.

Little Welty looked after him until his face took on a grimace of pain. Then he handed Buell's money belt over to Nellie, without looking inside it.

"You better take that for your share, girl," he said, with forced gentleness. "I got a blank stock certificate in there, Ramsay. Fetch it to me, quick. I want to keep all this ranch in the hands of the fightenest fool buckaroo that ever stepped across leather."

ZEKE hurried his horse to Mary's home. Nobody but her aged uncle was there.

"She said," the uncle explained, "that she was headin' east for to rest herself up a mite. Takes the mornin' train out of Cavvy Junction."

Zeke put spurs to his horse, and wondered if he might pick up a fresh mount anywhere along the way. It was twenty-one miles to the railroad station, and he had barely over two hours to make it.

He saw nothing on that long ride. He was just a frozen thing in the saddle; his badly bandaged wounds seemed numb.

The passenger train was whistling down the track when he got off the plateau, a mile from Cavvy Junction. His horse was too worn to run. Zeke saw he could not make it to the station. The train was puffing and hissing to a stop. Zeke swerved over onto the right of way and fought the weary animal down to meet the train.

The engineer had a hard time getting under way again, on the upgrade. Zeke jerked saddle and bridle off his horse, took a running lunge and swung up onto the steps of the first old-fashioned coach with open vestibule.

Passengers stared with fear in their eyes when that gangling, rawboned cowboy went striding down the aisle. He was blood-stained and grimy with sweat and smoke. Yet his face was as cold as the steel in the Colt swinging low on his long thigh.

Mary was not in this coach. Zeke went into the next. She was not there. Just one more coach left. He let the door slam hard behind him and never noticed it. An old lady emitted a frightened croak at sight of him, and made a ludicrous attempt to put her diamond ring into her shoe.

A young lady saw him, though, and did not become frightened. She had no golden braids this morning; the hair was done up neat as a pin beneath a becoming blue hat. Zeke stopped by her and leaned an arm on the back of her seat.

"You can't run away from me like this," his husky voice proclaimed to her. "I went through hell to come back to you, and I fought through a second hell this mornin' to make a place to keep you. Get off with me."

It was a command, not an entreaty. He reached up, seized the bell cord and pulled it three times. The train began slowing.

"Zeke, don't make it any worse," Mary begged him. "There was nothing left for me to do."

He seized her by the shoulder, brought her onto her feet. One of his arms went about her, gripped her tightly.

"I don't know what made a runaway out of you," he vowed, "nor do I care. You're goin' back. You're goin' to put your faith in me now like you did before. The kind of faith Little Welty

put in me. And I want it right now, Mary. Right now, before you make me explain away misunderstandin's or prove things or—or before I hogtie you and carry you off."

"But, Zeke, this doesn't need any more explaining, and—"

He pulled her tighter to him. Blood beat in his temples, furiously. The very touch of her was maddening.

"Right now, I said," he repeated. "Once you whispered to Little Welty to put faith in me. Whisper that back at me now, girl."

He swept away all other things and was demanding this strong girl's love, stark and unqualified. When Mary did not answer, then he himself whispered.

"I love you, girl. Love you till these very mountains know it when I look at 'em. Now give me that faith."

His lips went down on hers, slowly, hungrily. Suddenly Mary's arms were flung about him. Their lips crushed together.

"Well," came the grinning conductor's call finally, "do you two get off or will you ride on down to the county seat with me?"

"We'll get off," Zeke answered, "go home and do a little sparkin' while we sorter take a-hold of things."

Then he blushed until every passenger in the coach laughed happily.

●

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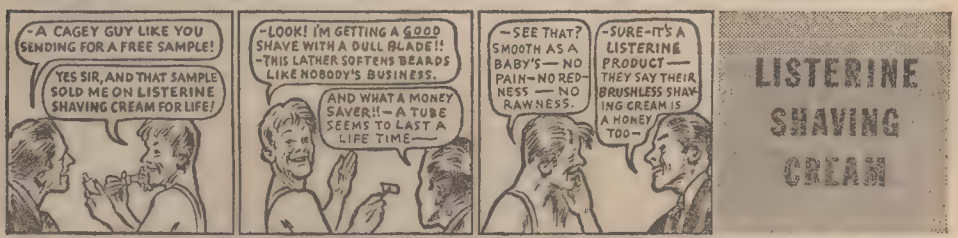
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Ring Around a Rascal

By Herbert A. Woodbury

A merry and rollicking tale of a cowpoke who had to do some fancy finagling to square himself with the law and with the prettiest girl he'd ever seen.

"AND so, young feller, you're in a jam. A mess." Lawyer Ezra Thayer's two blue eyes twinkled in bright elfin amusement as the gnome-like little attorney surveyed the tall, gangling young cowpuncher standing there so nervously ill at ease on the other side of his desk. "You realize, do you, I could send you to jail as a swindler?"

Rick Cameron, the tall, gangling young cowpuncher, looked back at Ezra Thayer. . . . Six weeks ago, Rick had lost his job; thus had fallen behind recently on the weekly installment payments which he was making on the diamond ring that he had bought for Honey Jackson. All of which was most embarrassing.

It seemed, Rick's failure to meet promptly his last three consecutive two-dollar payments had given the finance company the right to declare the whole remaining balance of a hundred and sixteen dollars immediately due and payable.

It seemed, furthermore, that if Rick couldn't pay up that immediately collectible balance, then he was compelled by the terms of his sales contract to return Honey's ring to the finance company. And that was the rub.

Rick not only hadn't a hundred and sixteen dollars. But he hadn't the slightest idea where to find Honey or the ring, either. Honey Jackson, getting tired of

a suitor who hadn't any more money to spend on her, had eloped; left Mesquite City three days ago with the strong man of an itinerant patent medicine show. And Rick was in a jam, indeed.

"Jail?" Rick stammered.

"Jail," Ezra Thayer repeated, his blue eyes still twinkling. "I dunno how carefully you read your sales contract, Rick; but you signed what's known as a sales lease. Under its wordin', your two-dollar payments was to be construed simply as rent of the ring.

"Upon makin' your final rent payment, you then had the right to buy the ring for the additional payment of only one dollar. But in the meantime, title to the ring remained vested in the finance company. It's like this:

"Supposin' you'd rented a team of horses and a rig to take Honey out drivin'. Supposin' you gave that rented team to Honey. And supposin', then, that Honey drove the team and the rig outa the country. You'd expect to be prosecuted for swindlin' the livery stable owner, wouldn't you? Well, Rick, that's precisely the mess you're in with the finance company. You're facin' a jail sentence anywheres up to ten years, unless. . . ."

Little Ezra Thayer teetered back in his chair, regarded Rick intently. A shaft of sunlight coming through the office window brought out the shades of green in the man's ancient, shabby frock coat. Ezra Thayer had a hundred thousand dollars salted snugly away in the bank. But Ezra had never heard, apparently, that you can't take it with you. In all the years that Ezra Thayer had successfully practiced law here in Mesquite City, the man had not only never spent a nickel on anyone else; he had never, if he could help it, spent a nickel on himself, either.

"Unless—" Ezra Thayer stressed the word; lingered over it. "Rick," said the lawyer suddenly, "Supposin' I got you out of this jam you're in? Paid up that balance of a hundred and sixteen dollars outa my own pocket? What would you do for me in exchange?"

Rick Cameron made no answer. He simply stood there staring at the little old miser in incredulous astonishment. Ezra? Offering to dig down into his own pockets for a hundred and sixteen dollars? Why, nothing like this had happened in the whole twenty-five years since Ezra had hung out his shingle! Rick felt a thousand uneasy qualms sweep over him. So far as he knew, Ezra wasn't a crook. Ezra hadn't ever been mixed up in anything diabolical or nefarious. And yet—it came to Rick that Ezra could hardly expect less than murder in exchange for a whole hundred and sixteen dollars.

Rick stammered, "Why—why, I dunno, Mr. Thayer."

Ezra cackled his delight at Rick's consternation. "I know," Ezra said, "you're a-wonderin', young feller, what possibly could be worth such a colossal amount of money to me. Well, I'll tell you." The lawyer gestured to Rick to sit down. He said, "It's a long sad story, Rick, but the gist of it's this. I'm in love. I—I'm willin' to spend that much money to win myself a gal. . . ."

Commencing at the beginning, Ezra told Rick the whole story in its full harrowing detail. It seemed, about six weeks ago, old Asa Hunter's two nieces had come out here from the East. Ezra had met the two girls; had fallen violently in love with the younger of the two, Miss Judy. Alas, however, Ezra had never been able to call on Miss Judy without having to sit there in the parlor with the older sister, Miss Martha, too.

In desperation, finally, the little lawyer had drawn Miss Martha aside; had told her that he wished to discuss with her a matter so vital that it affected his whole future happiness. Only, before Ezra had been able to go on, and explain that that vital matter consisted of his need of privacy with Miss Martha's sister, Miss Martha had thrown her arms about Ezra . . . had told the little lawyer that he need say no more. Miss Martha fully understood; Ezra was proposing to *her*, and she was accepting him!

"Whereupon," said Ezra, "who should

walk into the room, sixgun swingin' from each hip, but old fire-eatin' Asa Hunter himself. Asa practically cripples me, pumpin' my hand in hearty congratulations. And there I am, Rick. In love with Miss Judy. But with old Asa so enthusiastic about my marryin' Miss Martha, it's Miss Martha I got to marry.

"Only one way out for me, as I see it, Rick. I dassn't jilt Miss Martha. But if Miss Martha, of her own accord, was to jilt me, I'd be free."

Ezra grinned. "And that's where you come in, Rick. I'm invitin' Miss Martha to meet me in town for dinner, tonight. I'm hirin' three fake ruffians, to hold her up as she comes ridin' alone through the loneliness of Sycamore Canyon. You're to be trailin' her. When the attack starts, you come lopin' hell for leather to the rescue."

Rick sat there in chill horror. He hadn't met old Asa Hunter's two nieces. But he had a mental picture of the coy Miss Martha. A mental picture of any damsel who would throw her arms about an old scarecrow like Ezra Thayer.

Rick gasped, his blood curdling. "You mean you expect me to—"

"You 'save' her and then persuade Miss Martha that it's you—her romantic hero—whom she'd ought to love, instead of me. Precisely, Rick. You win Miss Martha away from me. Martha gives me back the ring Asa insisted I give her yesterday. I marry Miss Judy. And you—"

"And I," Rick staggered to his feet, "leap from the fryin' pan into the fire. To git out of two-three years in jail, I take a life sentence, instead. I end up no more able to git rid of the old battle-ax than you was."

"And who," demanded Ezra Thayer with a sudden show of heat, "says Martha Hunter's an old battle-ax?" Color suddenly suffused the little lawyer's cheeks; the man's voice shook. "Young man, how old do you think these women are? Ninety?"

Ezra Thayer got up out of his chair; faced Rick like an angry bantam rooster. "Rick," said Ezra, with bristling dignity, "Miss Judy's twenty-two years old; and Miss Martha's mebbe a little bit older. But she ain't no battle-ax! She's a handsome young woman, Martha is. Talented, too. Graduate, last spring, of the Eastern Conservatory of Music. Ain't nothin' in the world the matter with Martha Hunter, exceptin' I happen to be in love with her younger sister. Any hombre who wins Martha's hand's a lucky man! A danged sight luckier'n a brainless young jackass like you deserves to be."

For a long, long moment Rick Cameron stood there thinking it over. Martha was young? Pretty? Graduated just last spring from music school? Rick had a sudden new picture of the girl even less flattering than his previous one. For if the girl was all that Ezra said that she was—then what on earth had ever possessed her to drop her loop over an old galoot like Ezra in the first place?

Rick's lips twisted suddenly in sardonic cynicism. The answer wasn't very difficult, he guessed. Women—Rick had found out from Honey Jackson—were scheming, mercenary creatures who liked you in direct proportion to the amount of money you had. And Ezra Thayer might be an ancient old scarecrow, but he did have a hundred thousand dollars!

The twisted little smile lingered on Rick's lips. A moment ago he hadn't wanted any coy old spinster throwing her arms about him, calling him her hero. As far as that went, he didn't want any female at all falling in love with him. After Honey, Rick was through with all women, and it'd be mighty reprehensible of him, therefore, to arouse in the breast of any woman tender sentiments that he couldn't return. But he guessed suddenly that he needn't worry now about this scheming Miss Martha creature. No chance of breaking *her* cold calculating little heart!

Rick came abruptly to his decision. Why not take Ezra up on his proposition? It was at least a play for time.

And if enough time should elapse before Ezra should finally demand either results or jail, why by that time, Rick might have a job again. Might have a hundred and sixteen dollars and be able to get out of the whole mess even if he hadn't succeeded in weaning the mercenary Miss Martha away from her dream of a hundred thousand dollars.

Still grinning his bitter, cynical grin, Rick held out his hand to Ezra. "I see, old timer. Not an old battle-ax. Well, then, that makes it different, of course."

BRIGHT sunlight bathed the plank sidewalk in front of Ezra Thayer's law office. Rick, with the ten dollars expense money that Ezra had given him in his pocket, walked on down Mesquite City's cottonwood-shaded Main Street. He stopped in at South Brothers' hardware store; bought a box of blank ammunition for his gun. He paused in front of the *Intelligencer* office to look at the news bulletins: The European situation was still tense, apparently. Three bandits had wounded a Red Bluff rancher in a hold-up. . . . Then he wandered on to the livery stable; rented a pony.

Mesquite City fell away behind Rick. The tawny miles blurred. Rick jogged into Sycamore Canyon below old Asa Hunter's ranch, about an hour before dinner time. He found a thick clump of cat's claw behind which to hide. Still thinking his bitter, cynical thoughts, he waited for Martha Hunter to come down the road from her uncle's.

"Pretty and red-headed," Ezra had told him. "Prob'ly be ridin' Asa's big three-quarter bred gelding. Can't miss her."

Nor, presently did Rick miss the girl. Hoofbeats sounded finally. Old Asa Hunter's big gelding came by. And there astride the horse, pert and jaunty in fringed buckskin skirt and bright flame shirt, sat— Rick was shocked, somehow! Ezra had said of course that the girl was pretty and only a little bit older than her younger sister. But at that, Rick hadn't been prepared for the vision of complete loveliness which rode past him.

Older than her younger sister by no more, certainly, than a single year, Martha Hunter sat a-top the big horse, lithe, slender, erect. Health, animation, love of life, shone in a sensitive, tanned little face. And Rick, as he looked into that face, found himself doubling his fists in seething, boiling fury.

Fury at the girl for being willing to be an old man's darling. Yes, and a sudden chivalrous fury at Ezra Thayer, too. For all of a sudden, Ezra's conduct seemed despicable. Why should Ezra, having been undeservedly lucky enough to win a girl so lovely, want to get rid of her? There was no sense to it!

No, there was no sense to it. But the events whereby Ezra planned to free himself from the girl were already commencing. Rick had reined out of the brush. He had trailed the girl, some two hundred yards back, for about half a mile.

And now the whole meaningless farce of the fake rescue was commencing. Martha Hunter had momentarily disappeared from Rick's view round a twist of the shadow-filled canyon. The hoofbeats of her pony had come to a sudden halt. And the girl was screaming!

Rick spurred. Drawing his blank-loaded gun, he bent low on his pony's neck. He came round the twist of the canyon at a full dead lope. He took in the tableau—the three hired ruffians, the damsel in distress. In a way it was the essence of damned silliness to come roaring up on the scene like the cowboy hero of the kids' double-feature Saturday matinees. It was almost overdoing it. Any real hero, trying to rescue a girl from real bandits would be committing suicide, if he rode like this into a hail of real bullets. But at that, it was picturesque . . . romantic. . . .

Gun blazing its fearsome blanks, Rick bore down on the three fake ruffians. The trio blasted back at Rick with blanks equally fearsome. Rick had a

sudden little last minute quirk—what if the girl really should fall for this hero stuff? Rick let the thought die suddenly when one of the fake bandit's fearson blanks whistled through the peak of his Stetson! With equal, unceremonious rudeness the wad of a second blank pinked him in the shoulder, drew blood!

Rick's pony continued to take him forward, three mighty, roaring full strides a second. As it dawned upon him that the wads coming from the blasting guns ahead were *lead,* and not paper, he probably remembered the news bulletin he had read in front of the *Intelligencer* office; something about bandits wounding a rancher near Red Bluff, only forty miles from here. He thought, too, that he *was* a damned fool, riding into a hail of lead like a movie hero. Only, there wasn't any turning back, now.

Sick, weak with horror at the plight of the girl whom these three very real bandits might decide to shoot, Rick spurred faster and played out the hand the only way he could play it out.

His roaring rush had already closed most of the gap between himself and the three ruffians. Two split seconds more, and Rick was on top of the group. He was hurling himself from his saddle, locking his arms around a man who was trying to get the muzzle of a revolver into his stomach.

The inane brashness of his attack was what probably had saved Rick's life. Coming a mile a minute, he'd startled the wits out of the three bandits; made of himself at the same time a difficult target.

And now, that same brashness continued to play to Rick's advantage. He was on top of the one man, bulldogging the hombre out of his saddle, almost before the man could move. The man's gun muzzle didn't reach Rick's stomach. The gun flattened itself between Rick and its owner. There was a split second during which its owner didn't dare to discharge it. And suddenly, the bandit wasn't able to. For Rick, still with the advantage of the whirlwind aggressor, fell on top of the man as the two of them struck the trail.

Rick had his knee in the man's middle and both his hands transferred like lightning from the man's body to his gun-wrist. Rick was leaping back with a gun in his hand that didn't contain blanks. Rick, finger squeezing the trigger, was firing upward at one of the remaining pair. And then just as he saw that he had dropped the one bandit, Rick saw out of the corner of his eye that the man's companion was taking calm, deliberate, point-blank aim at him! And he knew it was curtains. His body just couldn't act fast enough. Either to roll out of the way, or to get his gun onto the new target. Rick waited for the thundering impact of lead to blast him into eternity. He heard the roar of a gun, not his own—and wondered why the slug of a forty-four, ripping into a man's stomach, didn't hurt more.

And then, dazedly, Rick saw that it was the bandit toppling to the ground, not himself! There in the hands of Martha Hunter was a tiny, smoking thirty-two! The furore which Rick had created had given the girl her gambler's chance of attempting a draw. And she hadn't hesitated a second!

Shaken, trembling in spite of himself, Rick staggered toward the girl. Just as shaken and just as trembling, the girl swung down from her horse. Now Ezra had told Rick that he must instantly take the girl into his arms. Only, somehow, it wasn't Ezra doing the dictating. Rick was obeying impulses all his own as he held close the loveliest—yes, and the most courageous, the bravest girl he'd ever met in his life.

Honey Jackson? Somehow, there in the thirty-forty seconds which had followed Rick's realization that the bandits were real bandits shooting real bullets, Rick had left behind him a world in which Honey had ever existed.

The girl clung to Rick. He told her softly, "There, there, Miss Hunter." And then as her amber eyes widened and asked the mute question—how he knew who she was—he told her:

"I saw you in town the other day, ma'am. Couldn't rest a second, after that, to find out who you was. Rode out here today, to—well, jest in the hope that you'd come ridin' by, and that mebbe I could feast my eyes on you again."

Rick didn't feel the slightest qualm of conscience at telling the untruth. For abruptly, it wasn't an untruth. There in the realm of a fantasy which was realer than reality, Rick saw himself doing just exactly what he was telling Martha Hunter that he had done. He *had* seen this gallant girl once before. Maybe not in town. But in his dreams. And that was the real reason why he had been here today—to protect her!

ICK floated on air the rest of that afternoon; and that glamorously idyllic evening which followed. With the girl helping him, he took his wounded bandits in town, delivered them to the sheriff. Ezra's fake bandits didn't spoil things by pulling a second attack. Rick saw them ahead of him, there in the brush. He shouted to them in Spanish, "Vamos," and succinctly explained that their mission had already been fulfilled by three very genuine badmen. He gave Martha—who didn't understand Spanish—a false translation. And if this meant lying to Martha a second time, what of it? Some day, thought Rick, when he had indeed won Martha away from Ezra, he'd tell her the truth. And they'd both laugh.

Yes, it was a glamorous evening. On the expense money supplied by Ezra, Rick took the girl, whom Ezra didn't want, to dinner in the Mansion House dining-room. He took her then out to the Dells, that moonlit, open-air dance hall on the bluff overlooking the Blue River. And only one thing troubled him.

Why had Martha Hunter practically forced Ezra into the engagement that Ezra so fantastically wanted to break? Why? Rick couldn't ask her, of course. For how was Rick supposed to know that she was engaged to Ezra unless she told him so, herself? Rick couldn't say to her, "Listen, Miss Hunter, what's all this about?" Rick had to wait, he guessed, until the right time came. Until he felt close enough to her to cease calling her Miss Hunter, first of all.

For it was funny. . . . Now that the moment when he had held the girl in his arms had faded, a sort of sudden shyness had stolen over Rick. He wanted Martha Hunter for himself so badly, he loved her so tenderly, that he didn't want to spoil things by rushing them too fast.

Still, it was a perfect evening for Rick. The soft music out there at the Dells died at last. Rick brought the girl home through the moonlight into her Uncle Asa's ranchyard. He followed her up to the front door to bid her good night.

A loose strand of her hair brushed his forehead. And all of a sudden he had her in his arms again; was kissing her this time, and telling her that he wanted to be honest with her. Telling her that he hadn't any job or anything, but that when he found one, he wanted to come calling on her again. Because he didn't want to spend any more of Ezra's money on her. This wasn't any longer Ezra's plot and scheme. It was Rick's own dream and hope. Ezra—like Honey—didn't exist.

"You'll let me come back?" Rick asked.

The girl didn't answer. She hadn't any chance to answer. For she hadn't noticed up until now. And Rick hadn't noticed it, either. But there at the other end of the veranda, two folks had been sitting in a hammock. And now with a sudden, spry little bound, one of those folks was out of the hammock and at Rick's side. Ezra! Ezra Thayer, who didn't exist!

Rick turned. Ezra faced him like some ugly, malevolent little gnome. Rick heard Ezra say to Martha Hunter, "Good evenin', Miss Judy." The name thundered and reverberated through Rick's head—Miss *Judy—Judy* Hun-

ter. He'd rescued and made love to the wrong girl? To Ezra's girl? Rick heard Ezra's furiously brittle voice addressing himself.

"And as fer you, young feller," Ezra's voice shook. "As fer you. . . ." Ezra didn't finish. In front of Judy Hunter there were things which doubtless Ezra didn't want to say. But the man hardly needed to finish. His anger, his manner was enough. Rick Cameron understood. He'd been kissing—he was in love with Judy! The girl Ezra wanted!

Ezra whirled. In a voice still trembling, the little lawyer called toward the end of the veranda. "And now good night, Miss Martha. Now that your sister's safely home, I reckon I'll be moseyin'." He paused; he called back, "Be seein' *you,* tomorrow, Mr. Cameron. Or will I? Mebbe you're leavin' fer the North Pole tonight." His voice died. Ezra Thayer hurried down the steps. He was gone.

Rick Cameron stood there, now, looking into the pleasant, kindly face of a woman in her mature and settled late forties, whom Judy was introducing to him as her half-sister, Martha. Martha, it was to develop later, had refused Ezra's ungallant suggestion that she meet him in town. Martha had insisted over the phone, instead, that Ezra come out and spend the evening on the veranda.

Rick stood there in a daze out of which he couldn't force himself while Judy ran on about the rescue. Then the kindly Martha shook his hand and told him:

"And now as for your being jobless, young man, I admire your honesty in telling Judy all about it. But I don't think I'd worry about it. Not after the debt in which you've placed Judy and me, as—well, you might say I was Judy's mother. I brought her up after her own mother died. No, cowboy, I wouldn't worry."

Martha smiled, and Rick realized that he had maligned her when he had first thought of her as an old battle-ax. Pretty, possibly, wasn't the word for Judy's certainly mature and womanly half-sister. But the word which Ezra himself had used—handsome—fitted her nicely. Martha beamed.

"I think you've got a job, cowboy. Working here for Uncle Asa." Rick, still in his weak daze, made no answer; and the woman had to repeat it. "I'm offering you a job, young man. Doesn't that solve everything? Make you happy?"

How he managed it, Rick Cameron didn't know. Manage it, he did, though. But it was far better, he guessed, to break the sad news, himself, to the girl he loved, than to let some rude, brusk constable break it, tomorrow.

"Ma'am," said Rick, with heaven heart-breakingly just out of reach, "I ain't been as honest with your sister as you think. I'm a criminal. A swindler!"

He looked miserably at Judy who was staring at him now with wide, unbelieving eyes. Part of the story, he couldn't tell, of course. Out of kindness to Martha. He couldn't say that when he had been rescuing Judy, he had been supposed to be helping Ezra Thayer to break his engagement to Judy's sister. So he limited himself to the mere beginnings of the story. . . . His buying a ring for a girl named Honey Jackson, his getting behind on the payments, having to return the ring now, and having no ring to return.

"So there you are," he finished. "The finance company's put the account in Ezra Thayer's hands, and Ezra Thayer ain't got no choice, I reckon, but to—"

"Fiddlesticks!" cried Martha Hunter.

Rick looked at Martha, most doubtfully. "I'm afraid it ain't fiddlesticks," he said. "Well, without goin' into too full detail, somethin's happened today that makes it almost positive that Ezra Thayer's goin' to—"

"And I still," cried Martha Hunter, "say it's fiddlesticks. I know. Ezra's an old rascal. Mean enough to send you to jail jest fer the unholy glee he'd get out of it. But he ain't goin' to do it! Young man," Martha Hunter's voice colored in sudden tenderness, "Ezra Thayer happens to be my fiancé.

"Startles you, does it? You're wondering what I possibly could see in Ezra Thayer? Well, I'll tell you. I see in him the chance to reform somebody. Make him loosen up and start spending some of that money of his. Ezra's mean, cussed, miserly, I'll grant. But I kind of like the old codger; think I could make something out of him."

Martha sighed; a happy little sigh. "So you see how simple that makes everything, young man? Being engaged to me, loving me like he does, Ezra jest naturally can't prosecute you. I'll tell him not to. If Ezra Thayer has you arrested, all I've got to do is—"

Martha drew herself up grandly. The woman reached for the third finger of her left hand. She removed a tiny gold circlet set with a diamond. A diamond that kind of made Rick gasp! For it was a dead ringer for the one he'd bought Honey! Ezra must have bought his at the same credit jewelry store in Red Bluff!

"All I've got to do," said Martha, "is to threaten to give this ring back to Ezra. So you see, young man, there's nothing to worry about. Positively nothing!"

It was funny, Rick thought. Only he couldn't laugh. Because it was too tragic. Not just for himself. But for Martha who had confessed to being really fond of old Ezra. Rick felt his heart constrict for Judy's sister as he visioned the scene, tomorrow, when Martha—blissfully ignorant, alas, that the very thing Ezra wanted was the breaking of his engagement—threatened to hand back the little lawyer's ring.

In his mind's eye, Rick could see Ezra eagerly snatching the ring from Martha, joyously getting out of his engagement; equally joyously sending Rick off to jail for having innocently double-crossed him in the matter of Judy. But what could Rick say to Martha?

Then Martha suddenly let out a little cry. "Oh! Oh, dear me!" She bounded forward. Rick and Judy bounded forward to help her. Martha had dropped her diamond ring! There in the moonlight dusk of the veranda, the ring was rolling . . . rolling . . . rolling. And Judy, who had been the first one to leap after it, was crying in consternation, "Gosh, it went over the edge into the bushes!"

WHEN Rick pointed his pony toward town, it was along about dawn. With the aid of a lantern, the three of them had searched in the bushes for Martha's ring for the better part of an hour. They hadn't found it. They *had* found a gopher or a snake hole into which it might have rolled. They had excavated the gopher hole with a spade—and still not found the ring. And now Rick simply prayed that Martha would be so busy looking for her lost ring all day today that she'd forget how she'd promised to save Rick Cameron from his troubles.

The tawny miles blurred, there in the pink light of the dawn.

Rick jogged on. To get his duffle. To report back later in the day for his new job at Judy's Uncle Asa's ranch. Ha! Rick wondered if ever, in the whole world, a hombre had got himself and his friends into a mess quite so horrible.

The tawny miles continued to slide past Rick. And Mesquite City was just looming up ahead of him when he heard the sudden pound of hoofbeats behind him. Rick pulled in; looked back. And it was Judy Hunter who was fast overtaking him. Judy was pulling her pony to a halt alongside Rick's, and demanding breathlessly, "Rick tell me. You called your girl Honey, you told us. What did Honey call you?"

Rick blinked. Here was Rome burning, and all Judy wanted inanely to ask him was this! He stammered, "What did Honey—"

Judy demanded with equal breathlessness, "Did she, by any chance, call you Lammykins? Because if she did, Rick, maybe you'd be interested in—"

Judy handed him something. It was a circlet of gold set with a diamond. Just like the gold circlet which Rick had

given Honey Jackson. Equally like the gold circlet which Ezra had given Martha. Judy cried, "Look inside, Rick. It's engraved so—so tenderly: 'Honey from Lammykins.'"

Judy's amber eyes twinkled. And Rick, his face turning from brick red to fire red, looked inside the ring. Engraved it was, indeed with the tender sentiment which he had had inscribed to Honey Jackson. Here in his hand was the very ring which he had given Honey!

Words completely failed Rick. He looked at Judy blankly, dazedly. And Judy's amber eyes went on twinkling. "And where did I get it?" Judy asked. "Why you saw me get it, Rick. I jostled Martha and made her drop it. I pounced on it just as it reached the edge of the porch. Because I had a hunch, Rick. The minute you told me your girl's name was Honey, it came to me. Ezra's an old miser. Why should he pay two hundred dollars for a ring for Martha, if he could get her a ring for a hundred and sixteen dollars?"

Judy laughed. "Don't you see, Lammykins? Ezra got wind, the other day, of Honey's marriage. So what did he do? As the demon legal representative of the finance company, he pounced on Honey before she could get out of town. He explained to her that you hadn't finished paying for the ring she was wearing; threatened her with the law if she didn't give it back. She gave it back.

"And Ezra said to himself, 'Isn't this nice? '*Honey from Lammykins*' might be from any swain to his love. I'll buy this ring for Martha. Buy it cheap. Dicker with the finance company to get it for the amount of Rick's unpaid balance. . . .'"

Judy let it trail. "And now, Lammykins, come clean. I've played my hunch—got your ring for you. But what I want to know is why, if Ezra had managed to recover that ring, he was threatening you at the same time with jail for losing it?"

Rick surveyed Judy. And after a long, long minute Rick came to his decision. Rick guessed that any girl who could still like him after realizing that his nickname with Honey had been Lammykins could be safely trusted to hear the rest of it. So Rick took it up from the very beginning; told the whole truth, this time.

"And that's everything, Judy. Exceptin' that regardless of how I happened to meet you, I—I love you. Yes, and exceptin' somethin' else I been thinkin' about as I jogged into town here. I been cogitatin' about Martha and Ezra. And you know, Judy, I don't think it'd be such a bad match at that. I think Martha *could* reform the old rascal. I think he'd let her. Because I think, whether he knows it or not, he actually is fond of her."

Rick plunged on. He told Judy how, disrespectfully there in Ezra's office yesterday, he had referred to Martha as an old battle-ax. And how, instantly and even gallantly, Ezra had bristled to defend Martha, how Ezra had said of Martha that she was a fine, handsome, talented young lady whom any man would be danged lucky to win.

Rick cried, "Ezra's temporarily infatuated with you, of course, Judy. But if we could bring him to his senses. . . . And, by Godfrey, we can! Come on, Judy!"

He spurred Rick. Judy spurred beside him. They hit Mesquite City. Rick took Judy to breakfast at the Coffee Cup Café on the last of Ezra's expense money. He left Judy alone for ten minutes while he went out to perform an important errand. And then wearing the grin of the cat who at last knows where to find the canary, he returned for Judy; marched Judy along with him to Ezra Thayer's office.

"SO THERE you are, Ezra," Rick said. Grandly, majestically, Rick tossed a handful of green bank notes onto the little lawyer's desk. "A hundred and sixteen dollars. The remainin' balance due and collectible on the ring that I bought for Honey Jack-

son. Ezra, I'm meetin' the conditions of my contract, payin' up all my delinquent rent and buyin' that ring. So, if you'll jest make me out a bill of sale, now, all legal and proper. . . ."

Across the desk, Ezra's blue eyes blinked a little. He suddenly looked most uncomfortable. And Rick knew what was passing through Ezra's mind. Ezra had tried to pull a fast one on Rick. Yes, and on Martha, too. But at that, Ezra was scrupulously honest about money. And now Ezra was in a spot. Ezra realized that if he accepted Rick's payment on the ring, then he was morally bounden, really, to give Rick the ring, too.

So what should he do? Refuse to take Rick's money? Confess to Rick that he had recovered the ring from Honey? Have to tell Rick, in other words, just what a fast one he had been trying to play on the cowpuncher? And then run the risk of having a furious and angry Rick beat him up for his chicanery? Ezra was on the spot. He couldn't, either morally or legally, keep both Rick's money and Rick's ring. So, what, indeed, should he do?

Rick saw the glint of cunning that flickered for an instant there in Ezra's eyes. Ezra moistened his lips and said quietly, "O.K., Rick, I—I'll accept your payment, only—" Ezra beamed, overflowed in what apparently was sudden generosity. "Only I won't send the money in to the finance company, quite yet. I'll keep it in my drawer. Then, if Honey should have a pang of conscience and send the ring back to the finance company, why— You see, Rick?"

Rick saw, to be sure. Ezra intended to tell him about two days hence that Honey had indeed been pricked by a pang of conscience; had sent the ring back to the finance company. Ezra would then, as if he were doing Rick a favor, hand Rick back his money. Yep, Ezra saw a loop-hole, whereby he could remain chemically honest, and still avoid telling Rick what a fast one he'd tried to pull.

Or rather, Ezra simply thought he saw such a loop-hole. For the instant Ezra handed Rick the bill of sale to the ring, Judy said sweetly, "And now that Rick's paid for his ring, Mr. Thayer, he'd like to have it."

Little Ezra Thayer blinked; stared at Judy. And maybe Ezra had a sudden, sneaking premonition of difficulties ahead, but he tried to bluff it out. "Then Rick's move," said Ezra, "is to find out where Honey went."

Rick shook his head. Judy shook her head, too. "I'm afraid the move's yours, Mr. Thayer," said Judy. "You see, when you gave Martha her ring, I read the sweet little inscription inside. And now both Rick and I know—"

Ezra gasped. They both knew? Ezra looked sick suddenly; pale, white. And it was Rick, now, who gently prompted him. "Shore, Ezra, we both know. And no hard feelin's, either. What if you did give the ring to Martha? You can git it back and give it to me, can't you? Easy enough, ain't it, to phone Martha and ask her?" Rick chuckled. "If you wanted to avoid trouble with fire-eatin' Uncle Asa, you might tell her this: That you'd decided you hadn't given her a nice enough ring. Tell her to return the one you gave her, and you'll give her a better one."

Ezra swallowed. The ring he had first given Martha hadn't, of course, cost him a nickel. He hadn't dickered with the finance company to buy it for Rick's unpaid balance. Because he'd expected Martha presently to return it to him when she jilted him in favor of Rick. He'd only, as it were, been borrowing a ring for a few days. While now he had to plunk out actual hard cash for a ring to replace the borrowed one? Not only that but the new ring had to be an even more expensive one?

Ezra hemmed and hawed. He begged Rick to take his money back. He even went so far as to offer to return to Rick, first fifty per cent and then a whole hundred per cent of the money that Rick had spent in prior installment payments on the ring. Only Rick was adamant. He didn't want his money back. He

wanted the ring he'd bought and paid for. He insisted he had a legal right to it. And thus nothing remained for Ezra to do except to phone Martha.

Alas, poor Ezra. . . . Rick, a little while ago, had learned the meaning of overwhelming disaster. Now Ezra learned it. White as a ghost, after a moment, the little lawyer put down the phone following his brief, gasp-punctuated conversation with Martha. He faced Rick tremblingly.

"Look, Rick," he stammered, "I—I'm afraid you'll simply have to accept the return of your money." Perspiration breaking out on his forehead, Ezra informed Rick and Judy what, naturally, they already knew. He cried plaintively, "Martha's lost her ring, Rick, and so. . . ."

Rick drew himself up. He looked down at the unhappy Ezra with eyes that twinkled in the same bright, elfin amusement with which Ezra had regarded *him* yesterday morning. He said, quoting what Ezra had said to him, then:

"And so, young feller, you're in a jam. A mess. Why, gosh dang it, Ezra, I could send you to jail as a swindler! You're as desperate a criminal as you figgered I was. Givin' away property you didn't own. Failin' to restore it to its rightful owner when its owner demanded it. Ezra, you're a-facin' anywheres from one to ten years."

Rick turned. He said, "Come on, Judy. Nothin' to do, I reckon, but to swear out a warrant." He looked back at little Ezra Thayer, sitting there with his face the same color as his green frock coat. "Or could I proposition you, Ezra?" he said. "If I got you out of this mess you're in, would you do *me* a favor?"

Ezra lifted two chastened, pleading blue eyes; indicated that he, now, in his turn was willing to listen to any bargain short of murder. "Yes, Rick," Ezra said.

And Judy answered for Rick. "Well, our proposition's this, Ezra. You're to go to the bank and draw out a thousand dollars. You'll spend seven hundred dollars of it buying Martha a ring that's really worthy of her. You'll spend all but two dollars of the rest buying new clothes, sprucing yourself up so that you'll look like a respectable bridegroom. Then with the two dollars you'll buy a marriage license. What about it, Ezra? Are you willing to—"

"Willing," chuckled Rick, interrupting, "to marry the old battle-ax, yourself?"

"Battle-ax?" cried Ezra leaping indignantly to his feet. Then it seemed as if a great idea was dawning on him. He looked at Rick. He looked at Judy. He grinned. All of a sudden he didn't even seem to mind the idea of spending a thousand dollars. He looked the way Rick himself looked—like the cat who has finally discovered where to find the canary.

"Martha Hunter," said Ezra, coming to his senses, "is a fine, handsome, talented young lady."

RICK and Judy rode slowly out of town, just behind Ezra Thayer and the preacher. Judy looked at Rick and said, "But there's one thing I still don't quite understand. You haven't told me yet where you got a hundred and sixteen dollars."

"Oh, that," said Rick with supreme indifference. "Why, easy, Judy. I hocked the diamond."

"You what?" gasped Judy.

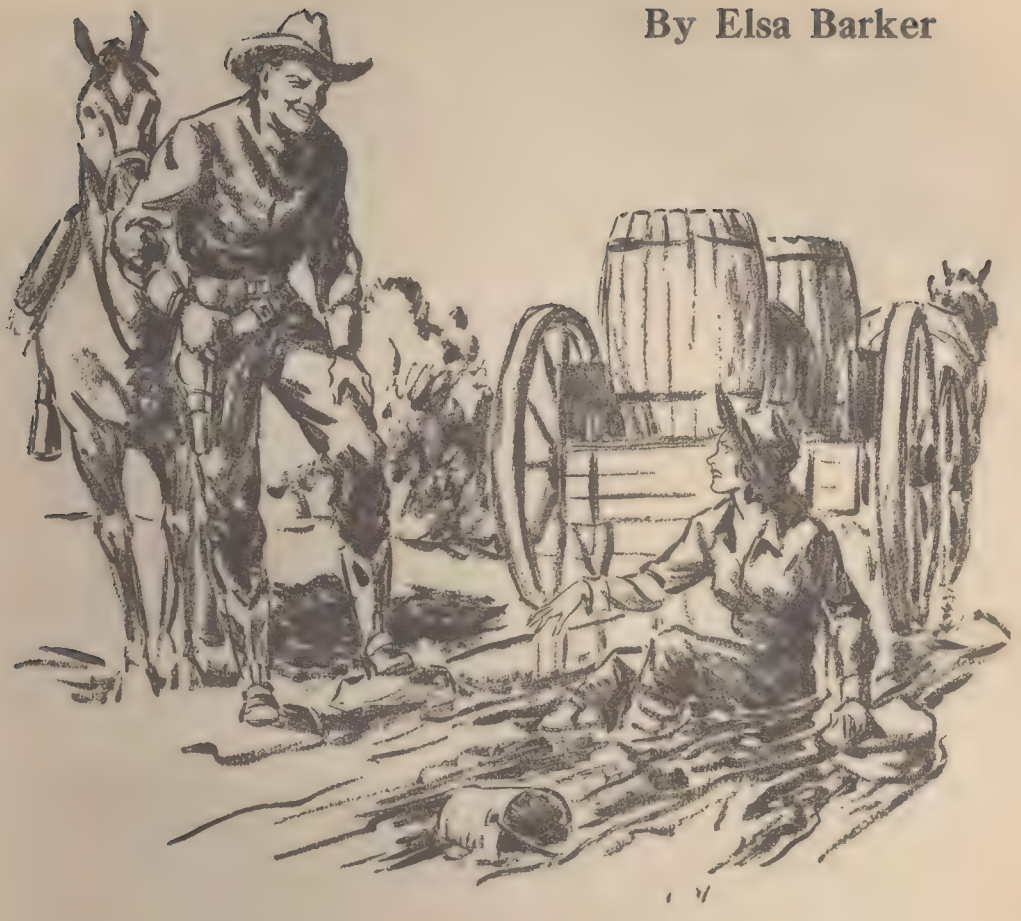
"Pawned Honey's ring."

Judy stared at him. "But you didn't own it, then."

Rick grinned. "That's right, Judy. When I pawned the ring, I didn't yet own it. For about a half an hour there—up until Ezra give me my legal title to it—I really was a swindler, I reckon. Still love me?"

Judy spurred close to Rick. Her amber eyes were soft. "Martha seems to be marrying one rascal," said Judy. "I—I don't see why I shouldn't marry another one."

By Elsa Barker



Puncher's Promise

Trouble pursued this lady boss relentlessly. Drought—unfaithful hired hands—and a Mexican adversary. Then one wandering cowpoke decided she'd been plagued long enough.

KIM MAGOFFIN had ridden through this neck of Sacaton County once before. But in five years the look of the country had changed. Then from these lush, pine-covered foothills a man could look down on smoothly rolling hills that merged into seemingly endless mesas, and everywhere, as far as he could see, soft, cool greenness met his eye. Now it all had a dry, blistered look. Even the pines showed the effects of drought, and every tree bore patches of yellowed needles. Then the Rio Sacaton had been a rushing, booming creek. Now it had thinned down to little more than a trickle.

Kim reined Chato, his high-stepping roan, out of the road and down to the creek for a drink. It might be the last chance he would have for a while, for he remembered that less than a quarter of a mile from here the Sacaton ran over a series of limestone ledges and disappeared entirely.

Then from somewhere close he heard

a loud splash mingled with the scraping sound of tin on rocks. The next instant a voice rose shrilly: "Whoa there, Pete! Whoa, Prince!"

Chato wasn't thirsty, so Kim urged him down toward the noise. He rounded a curve in the creek just in time to see a slim figure in dripping, once-blue overalls pull itself up out of a puddle of water. A battered old Stetson hanging to the northeast quarter of the head looked as if it were ready to drop the rest of the way any minute.

Two bay ponies hitched to a new red and green wagon cocked startled ears at the sound of Chato's steps, then relaxed again to doze peacefully in the sun.

An amused twinkle crept into the cowboy's gray eyes.

"Hello, button!" he said. "I wouldn't think you'd go in swimming with all your clothes on thataway!"

The small figure straightened and whirled around so suddenly that the tumbling Stetson missed the water's edge by a hair's breadth. A mass of dark red curls tumbled down almost to the slender shoulders.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," Kim Magoffin said instantly. "I thought you was a boy."

The girl stared at him for a moment, then she stammered:

"Why—why, hello!" It was definitely not one of those moments when a young and pretty girl feels at her best. She looked down at her dripping clothes and muddy hands. "I fell down!" she said wrathfully. "That's twice today! Those rocks don't look slick either!"

The cowboy's eyes lost some of their amusement as they took in the whole picture—the two overturned five-gallon buckets, the four big water barrels wedged together in the body of the wagon.

"Haulin' water for stock's a mighty tough job for a gal."

"Don't I know it?" the girl said tartly. "And if there was a single man in this whole darned county not too lazy or too yellow to work for me I wouldn't have to."

Kim shifted in the saddle, resting his weight on one boot toe. He pulled the makin's out of his pocket and rolled himself a smoke. A sudden impulse that he didn't stop to analyze made him say:

"If you're lookin' for a hired man and I'm lookin' for a job, that ought to make it unanimous."

The girl shrugged her shoulders. "I'm afraid it's no use. I've hired five men in the last two weeks. One of them quit the second day when he asked me to marry him. The other four cleared out after a little chat with Juan García!"

"Juan García!" Kim Magoffin exclaimed. "He's one of the County Commisioners, isn't he?"

"That's right," the girl said bitterly. "And his brother Conrado's the sheriff, and his brother-in-law José Marie Sequín's the District Judge. There isn't much happens in Sacaton County until they say it can happen—and right now Juan says I can't dig a well or hire anybody to haul water for me."

The cowboy swung down from his horse. "This job begins to look interestin'. You better hire me, ma'am. I don't scare easy. But I won't make no rash promises about not askin' you to marry me until I see what kind of a face is under that mud you've got on it."

The girl's dark eyes began to blaze. "It's *my* face!" she said angrily. "If I want to wear it dirty, that's my business! And—and I won't stand for impudence!"

Chuckling the cowboy picked up the water buckets, scooped them full and carried them to the wagon.

The girl watched him for a moment, the anger fading from her eyes. Then with something like a smile touching the corners of her lips, she stepped down to the creek and washed her face and hands.

The water barrels were already almost full. Two more trips with the buckets filled the last one. That done,

Kim turned and watched the girl as she slicked the red curls back from her face with a pocket comb. He drew in his breath like a man who's been hit over the solar plexus.

"I can't blame that other poor puncher none, ma'am," he said, and it wasn't wholly teasing this time. Then as the girl's eyes began to blaze again, he grinned. "But I reckon I can restrain myself for a while. My name's Kim Magoffin."

"And I'm Jen Douglas."

"Now what's all this about not being allowed to drill a well or hire a hand? I thought we had laws in this country and courts to take care of them."

The tired bitter look came back to the girl's face.

"That's just the trouble," she said. "We do have a law—about the well, I mean. You see, in the southern part of this county and in Mares County the farmers have been striking artesian water. They have to go a thousand feet for it, but it's changed dry, almost worthless prairies into good farming land. People flocked in there by the hundreds, homesteaded a quarter section of dry land and put down an artesian well. Finally they began to notice that every new well lessened the flow of all the others a little. So they put a bill through the last legislature limiting the number of wells that could be dug in Sacaton and Mares Counties and leaving the regulating up to the County Commissioners."

"But you don't want an artesian well do you?"

"Of course not," the girl said instantly. "I don't want to farm. I just want to put up a windmill and pump enough water for my stock. I wouldn't have to go deeper than fifty feet. That couldn't possibly touch that artesian water supply and Juan García knows it. There was a spring on my place when I bought it two years ago. A good one I thought—but the drouth has dried it up completely."

"Is there a law against you hirin' hands, too?"

"Oh, no. Juan just swells up like a toad and looks mean and warns them that working for me is bad medicine."

Jen turned her head suddenly, listening. When she looked at the cowboy again there was a speculative look in her eyes.

"You're going to find out about that pronto," she said. "Here comes Juan García now. He keeps close tab on me these days."

A HEAVY Mexican was approaching on a prancing palomino. Kim had never seen the man before, but everyone who had ever lived in New Mexico had heard of Juan García, political boss of Sacaton County. He had once, so common gossip said, been quite a Romeo with the ladies, but now he was not such a dashing, handsome figure. He was beginning to look greasy. His face had fattened and thickened, and his heavy jowls quivered over his shirt collar with every stop of his horse.

He pulled up alongside Kim and the girl. His small black eyes were cold as he looked at the cowboy.

"You are a stranger here?" he asked. His voice was soft and purring with only the faintest trace of an accent.

Kim grinned. "Well, yes!" he said. "Sort of. Miss Douglas just hired me to haul water for her—and later when I get around to it I'm goin' to dig her a well."

He heard the girl give a little gasp. Juan García swung his heavy head around to her.

"So?" he said softly. "I would like to know, *señorita,* in just what coin you pay these—these saddle bums that are always so anxious to work for you when I know you have no money?"

The way he said it left no doubt as to his meaning. Jen Douglas' face turned suddenly scarlet.

"You know that's a lie, Juan García!" she said fiercely. "I have some money—enough to pay—no, Kim! No!" Her

voice rose sharply. "He's got a gun! He'll shoot!"

In two long strides the cowboy had reached the Mexican's side. His hand caught the fat arm that was clawing for a pearl-handled pistol, and gave it a sudden hard yank. Juan García slipped a little sideways in the saddle. The horse gave a startled snort and lunged forward, but Kim kept his hold. García slid out of the saddle and hit the ground with a thud.

The cowboy stooped over him, picked the pistol out of its holster and threw it into the Rio Sacaton. Swearing in Spanish, Juan García pulled himself slowly to his feet. One hand rubbed the spot where he had hit the ground.

Kim waited until he was up, then stepped in quickly. His right fist caught the Mexican squarely on the point of the jaw and sent him stumbling backwards. Juan García sat down again, his fat face looking surprised.

"Get up!" Kim ordered.

But this wasn't the kind of a fight *Señor* García was used to, nor the kind of odds he liked. He shook his head.

"No! You think Juan García fights like a bull?"

Kim stooped, caught him by the shirt collar, and yanked him to his feet with one hand while the other slapped his face.

"Get up!"

Warily, the Mexican got to his feet. When Kim stepped forward this time he backed away. Kim followed.

"Get on your horse and get out of here! This is just a sample—and there's plenty more where that came from if I ever catch you botherin' Miss Douglas again!"

Suddenly García whirled and ran toward his horse. For a short-legged fat man he got there in a hurry.

Kim turned back to the girl. Her face was a little white.

"Well, you sure fixed things just swell! Now he *will* make trouble!"

The cowboy's face was sober now too, and gentle, as he looked down at her.

"Do you think I could stand there and let him say things like that about you?" he asked.

Jen Douglas shrugged. "Talk doesn't hurt much," she said. "It's what he'll *do* that I'm afraid of."

Juan García had finally caught the palomino. He came riding back. From the comparative safety of the back of his horse he regained some of his arrogance.

"Juan García does not forget," he said. "*Gringo* pig! You will see!"

Kim started toward him again, but this time the Mexican was too quick for him. He stuck the spurs viciously to his horse and loped away.

Jen Douglas laughed bitterly. "Well, anyway," she said, "I've had a hired man long enough to finish filling one barrel! And now, Kim Magoffin, if you know what's good for you you'll get on that pretty roan horse of yours and ride fast and not stop until you've crossed the county line."

"And what about you, Jen?"

The girl shrugged.

"Oh, I'm licked. I've known it for two weeks, only I've been too stubborn to give in. But I'll have to now; I can't fight any longer. My ranch is five miles from here. I can make two trips a day for water, but it isn't enough. I've got thirty cows left, twenty-five of them with calves. The water I've been hauling keeps them alive, but they get poorer every day. I can't stand to see them suffer. I've got to sell."

"Sell? You've got a buyer then?"

"Juan García. That's what all the fuss has been about. He sold me the place two years ago for three thousand dollars. Now he wants it back for a thousand. The drought's hit him. You see, I haven't overgrazed my place; I've still got grass and he hasn't."

"Looks like I've got to figure some way of gettin' you a well. We can't let that fat greaser lick us."

The girl looked worried. "No," she said quickly. "It's not your fight. I won't hire you! You don't know Juan García like I do. He'll be back tomor-

row with a big posse and a warrant for your arrest for assaulting him. If you so much as lift a finger to resist they'll kill you."

The cowboy straightened his shoulders and squinted at the sun.

"Looks like we'd better be movin' along if I'm goin' to haul another load of water today."

Jen tugged at his sleeve urgently.

"Please, Kim! You mustn't! I talked sharp a while ago because I was tired and mad and maybe a little ashamed to have anyone see me looking like this, but I can't let you get into trouble on my account. A little money or a piece of land isn't worth it."

"Hop up on the wagon," Kim said. "I'll tie Chato behind and ride with you."

The girl opened her lips to protest again, then suddenly closed them, shrugged her shoulders in defeat and climbed over the wheel into the wagon seat.

MAGOFFIN was up before daybreak the next morning. He was back at the ranch by nine o'clock with the first load of water. A little before noon he rolled into the yard with the second. Jen, from the doorway, waved to him and called that dinner was ready.

She had taken advantage of her vacation from water hauling to scrub the house sweet and clean. There was a low bowl on the table with three bright red cactus blossoms in it, and the fragrance of frying chicken and apple pie filled the bright kitchen.

Kim Magoffin's eyes noticed these things but it was upon the girl herself that they lingered. She had discarded the old blue overalls for a clean print dress that fit snugly over her slender hips and waist. There were sheer, white ruffles next to her throat, and something seemed to have ironed the tired, bitter lines out of her face. Today she looked as she should have looked always—young and sweet and appealing.

Kim had the usual man's appetite for apple pie and fried chicken but today he ate with scant attention to the food. He felt his heart pounding a little faster than usual. It had never behaved quite like that before, but he knew what was happening to him. He knew, too, that he'd better keep his trap shut. Jen was angry and defiant at the treatment she had received from Juan García and his *politicos*. She was still suspicious of every man she met. Any hint of love talk now and more than likely she would pitch him out on his ear.

With an effort he made himself remember that he had a job to do. He pushed back his chair and rolled himself a smoke.

"I want this afternoon off. I've got some business in town."

Jen frowned. "What kind of business?"

Kim grinned at her.

"*Well* business. I want to see if I can find a driller and have him here on the ground ready to start work in the morning."

He heard her give a little gasp. She gave him a long searching look.

"While you're in town you might get me a box of insect powder," she said. "I'll make you a present of it. From what I hear about the county jail you'll need it."

Kim stood up. "I don't reckon I will," he said easily. "I figger on ridin' over to García's a while this evenin'. I think maybe I can persuade him to change his mind about that well."

"Can't you think of a pleasanter way of committing suicide?"

"Maybe Juan García ain't such a damn tough jigger as he figgers himself," Kim said.

He went out to the corral, caught Chato and tossed his saddle on him. When he turned he saw that Jen had followed and was waiting for him at the gate. Now her face had that tired, whipped look again.

"I understand, Kim," she said quietly. "And I don't blame you a bit. When Juan García comes I'll tell him you're gone—that you left last night. Then maybe he won't bother me again for a few days."

Kim leaned down from the saddle and for an instant let his hand rest lightly on the soft, red curls.

"Chin up, honey!" he said. "We're not licked yet. And if you get restless for somethin' to do, you might ride over to Juan's place about five this evenin'. I might need your help."

The girl drew back from his hand.

"You'll make things easier for you and me both," she said coldly, "if you keep Chato's nose pointed east and keep traveling."

He grinned at her over his shoulder as he rode out of the yard, and somehow it made Jen mad. Bewildered and angry she stalked back to the house.

"That's probably the last I'll ever see of him," she told herself, and added defiantly: "And I'm glad too! He's nothing but a trouble-maker." But she couldn't help having a lost, gone feeling around her heart.

Washing the dishes she caught herself remembering how his eyes crinkled up at the corners when he laughed, how tall and straight and clean looking he was.

Should she go over to Juan García's this afternoon as he had asked her to, or should she stay at home and mind her own business? Of course Kim wouldn't be there anyway. His talk was all bluff and right this minute he was heading out of Sacaton County and wouldn't ever be back. Tears stung her eyelids at the thought, but the next instant she was furious at herself for feeling this way about a stranger.

Maybe one of these days it would rain. Then she wouldn't need a well, nor a hired man, and Juan García would leave her alone for a while. She was going to stay home! She certainly wouldn't be a party to stirring up more trouble with the García gang now.

She thought she heard the distant thud of horses' hoofs and the sound of men's voices and ran to the window to look. It was what she had been half expecting all day—Juan García at the head of a posse. Her eyes narrowed contemptuously. There must be twenty five or thirty of them. Well, it would take that many like the fat Mexican to match one Kim Magoffin.

She ran into her bedroom and strapped a holster around her slender waist. When they pulled up in front of the house she was waiting for them in the open doorway, her eyes cold, one hand resting on the gun butt at her hip.

As her glance flickered over the posse she felt a shock of dismay sweep over her. Four of the men were Juan García's vaqueros, but the others were mostly her Mexican neighbors. Small ranchers, farmers, poor men all of them. Until now she had thought of them as her friends.

"Where is he?" Juan García spoke sharply.

"Gone."

"Where?"

Jen shrugged. "I don't know."

Coolly she met the fat Mexican's probing eyes.

"It is well for you, *señorita!* Let this be a lesson to you," he said softly. He turned in the saddle and gestured with his arm. "You see the smoke from the fire beyond the hill?"

Jen nodded.

"Some of my *compadres* are heating a barrel of tar over there," he said. "The wives of these men have given the feathers from some of their best pillows. We planned a party for your friend. We hoped to have you watch it with us—then maybe you like a few days in jail or leave the country pronto."

Jen felt an icy hand reach in and squeeze the blood from heart, but she tried not to let her sudden terror show in her face or voice—terror not alone for herself but for a tall cowboy with a teasing grin, and steady eyes.

"Why?" she asked quietly. "What

have I done that these men—my neighbors—should hate me so?"

Several of the men looked suddenly ashamed. Their eyes dropped away and wouldn't meet hers.

"These are good men!" Juan García made a wide, sweeping gesture with one fat arm. "They try to raise good boys and girls. Women like you are a bad influence on their young people. They do not like it that you live here alone—with first one man, then another. You are a disgrace to—"

Jen felt sudden, furious anger wipe away all fear. Her gun came out of its holster with a quick, deft motion.

"Get out!" she said furiously. "Get off of my land! Every blasted, stinking one of you before I lose my temper and start shooting!"

"Wait!" Juan García put out his hand. "Maybe you like now to reconsider. Maybe you like to sell me this place now for—eight hundred dollars?"

"No! Put me in your filthy jail and keep me there the rest of my life; I'll never sell to you at any price! Never! I'll give you just one minute to get this gang moving!"

Juan García was not a brave man. He saw the wild ferocity of a trapped animal in the girl's face and knew she meant what she said. He spoke sharply in Spanish to the others, turned his horse and rode away. Several of the Mexicans hesitated a moment, looked at the girl as if they half intended to apologize to her, but when she turned and went into the house, slamming the door behind her, they followed García dutifully away.

IT WAS mid-afternoon when Kim Magoffin asked directions from a storekeeper in Sacaton for the way to the García ranch, and although he kept the long-legged Chato at a fast trot it was well after four when he got there.

He had figured his time a little too close. He would have to rush things with Juan García more than he had intended, but if he hurried he would have either succeeded or failed by five o'clock. He hoped he had figured García right. If not—if the Mexican was shrewder than he thought—well, six months in the dirty jail in Sacaton was the least he could expect.

Five saddled horses with newly dried sweat roughing their coats, stood at the hitch rail. There was no sign of their riders. The big adobe ranch house looked deserted. Apparently the siesta hour was running late this afternoon.

Kim's spurs jingled with every step as he walked up the path to the house.

Juan García lay asleep in a hammock on the porch. On the floor beside him big blue flies buzzed about an empty whiskey bottle. Kim stepped up on the porch, purposely half turning his back to the open doorway.

"*Señor* García!"

The Mexican opened a groggy eye. Then both eyes blinked wide like a surprised bull frog. Juan García sat up suddenly.

"You!" he said explosively. "What are you doing here?"

Kim grinned at him. "Business," he said easily. "I got a permit in my pocket for Miss Douglas to dig a well. It's all filled out. All you got to do is sign it."

"And why do you think I will sign it, *gringo?*"

"Because I've got authority to make you plenty trouble if you don't, García! I saw the other County Commissioners this afternoon. They agreed to sign—after you."

The Mexican swelled up like a teased horny toad.

"*Pendejo!*" he said viciously under his breath. Then he raised his voice. "José! Lorenzo! Toribio! *Vengan acá!*"

In the room behind him Kim heard the floor creak softly. Juan García's black eyes slid past his shoulder, flashing a desperate appeal.

Kim intended to let them take him eventually, but he didn't want to make

it too easy. Neither did he like the idea of getting bored by a bullet or having his skull split open by a gun barrel blow from behind.

A quick step to the right brought solid adobe wall to his back. The same instant the man inside hurtled out the door. His gun swung in an arc and came down scraping the cowboy's arm instead of the head it had aimed at.

Kim thrust out a boot toe. The Mexican sprawled headlong on the porch floor. Another hard shove from Kim's boot sent him rolling off the porch into a bed of cactus. He yelled shrilly, got to his feet and fled around the corner of the house, yanking off his clothes as he ran.

Kim turned to face three more slim vaqueros as they sprang through the doorway. A gun gleamed in the hand of the one in the lead. Kim jumped forward, caught his arm and twisted it sideways as he pulled the trigger. The bullet thudded into the floor.

From his safe seat in the hammock he heard Juan García screeching:

"No! No! *Tontos!* Don't shoot! Don't kill him yet! *Cobardes!* Fight him with the hands!"

Kim suddenly got a good hold on the Mexican's arms. He lifted the slight, wiry body above his head and swung him off the porch. He hit the ground and lay still.

The cowboy whirled to face the other two as they closed in. One had a chair in his hands. As Kim turned he swung it. Kim saw it coming and might have had time to duck, instead he twisted his head sideways. One leg of the chair grazed the side of his head, but his shoulder took the most of the blow. With what he hoped was a realistic sounding groan he crumpled to the floor.

Instantly the two vaqueros piled on top of him. A hard fist cracked into the cowboy's nose. Another grazed his ear. Involuntarily he groaned again. He felt the warm blood spurt out of his nose and run down the side of his face.

Juan García took charge again now.

"Toribio! Get a rope!" he ordered. "José! Bring me what you find in his pockets!"

Reluctantly the two Mexicans got up, but one of them gave him a parting kick on the side of the head as he did so. Kim felt his senses reeling. For the first time genuine fear stabbed through him. If Juan García did not fall into the trap he had laid for him they might kill him while he was helpless to defend himself. Desperately he fought to hold onto consciousness, but he couldn't quite do it. Waves of blackness swallowed him.

When he came to a few minutes later Juan García was working with feverish anxiety, trying to untie the knotted rope that bound him.

A slender figure in faded blue jeans appeared suddenly at the porch steps.

"Put 'em up!" she ordered sharply. "Higher!"

Juan García whirled, his hands in the air.

"Of course, *señorita!*" he said politely. "There has been a mistake, a bad mistake." He scowled at the two vaqueros. *"Pendejos!* Get out!" He turned again to the girl. "I am so sorry, *señorita!* I make little joke and these fools—they don't understand! Let me untie him for you."

"Keep back!" Jen said sharply. She waved the gun menacingly at the two vaqueros. "And you two stay right where you are."

She drew a knife from her pocket, managed to open it and at the same time keep the gun pointed unwaveringly on Juan García's middle. She sawed through the ropes, slipped her free arm under Kim and helped him to his feet. He swayed drunkenly, still dazed by that last kick on the head.

"Thanks, Jen."

"Come on, let's go," she said quickly.

Kim patted her shoulder. "Not yet. You can put your gun away now, Jen. I think he means what he says, eh, *Señor* García?"

The Mexican's fat face creased into an anxious, fawning smile.

"Yes, yes! We are all friends now, *qué no?*"

Jen gave the cowboy a quick, blank look but kept her gun trained on García.

"We'd better go!" she said stubbornly.

Kim crossed the porch and pointed to a small heap of belongings in the hammock.

"You're through with those, Don Juan?"

"Yes, yes, of course!" Juan García scooped them up in his fat hands and held them out to the cowboy.

Gravely Kim stowed them away in his pockets—a red bandanna, a leather wallet, a small pouch of tobacco and a thin sheaf of cigarette papers, a pearl-handled six-shooter, a shiny metal shield, and the folded sheet of paper that was Jen Douglas' permit to dig a well.

Kim held the paper in his hands a minute.

"You wouldn't reconsider signing this, Don Juan?" he suggested.

For just a second the Mexican hesitated, then he held out his hand nervously.

"Yes, yes! Of course! You will say nothing of this? For you, *amigo,* I am glad to!" His hand shook as he signed the paper. He waddled across the porch, made a courtly little bow to the girl and handed it to her. "Your permit, *señorita!* And now we are friends, *qué no?*"

With a queer dazed look on her face Jen took the permit. She let her six-gun slide slowly back into its holster.

"Th-thanks, Don Juan!"

"And now, Jen, let's go!"

VOLUBLY protesting his friendship, and urging them hospitably to come again—and often—Juan García walked with them to the gate. Once out of earshot Jen turned to the cowboy.

"But what's it all about? I saw that badge. Are you an officer, Kim?"

Chuckling, he handed her the shiny shield.

"Junior G-Man—U. S. A." she read. She looked puzzled.

"They come with breakfast food," he grinned. "You send in two tops or something. I've just been visiting my sis in Colorado. My little nephew had two, so he gave me one. Evidently García took it for the real thing. He thinks his *bravos* rough-handled a Federal man and it's got him plenty scared."

Jen Douglas laughed, then as suddenly sobered.

"But when he finds out you impersonated a Federal officer, Kim—"

"I never impersonated nobody. Just pinned that badge where he couldn't help finding it and let him jump to his own conclusions."

"But, gosh, Kim, if he writes to Washington and—"

"I don't figger he will. He's shrewd, but not too smart. These Mex *politicos* have got a screwy idea of government anyhow. They figger it's 'big dog boss all the little dogs.' García's the big dog around here all right, but to him the Federal Government is the heap big top dog of 'em all, and with all the crookedness he's pulled in politics he ain't goin' to be too anxious to have it sniffin' around his private territory. But if he does—I told him I had authority to make him trouble—and I have."

He patted the .45 at his thigh. At the girl's silence he turned his eyes away too soon to see the look in hers.

"Anyhow, by then you'll have your well. I saw the driller this afternoon. We better ride in and get them other commissioners to sign, and then—well, I reckon I'll be ridin' on."

"Riding on?" Jen repeated in a small, lost voice.

"I made you a promise the other day," he said. "About not askin' you to marry me. I can't stay and keep it."

"What's a promise to a Junior G-Man?" she said shyly. "I—I'd rather you'd stay, Kim!"

Cows Must Eat!

By Isabelle M. Horn

Janie, engaged to the local banker, delves into high finance in the interest of a certain cowpoke. She finds that only love can balance the heart's ledger.

I

THE SLIM dark-eyed girl in blue jeans and checked gingham shirt, with a gay plaid handkerchief tied peasant-fashion over her hair, collided sharply with a scowling hurrying figure that burst suddenly from the revolving door of Banner City's only bank.

"Don't mind me!" the girl murmured, pushing back a disarranged cluster of brown hair. "It's my mistake for thinking this was a bank."

"You and me both! Calling a joint like this a bank is as funny as—"

The lanky cowboy who had seized her elbows in a steadying grip released her with a little shake and a surprised yelp.

"Why, gosh, kid, it's you! How'd you ever land up here, Janie?"

"Miss Harris to you, Mister Buzz Foster, just in case you think I've forgotten that ringer you worked off on me at Salinas last year."

"Now, Janie; all right, Miss Harris then. . . ."

A sheepish grin edged Foster's cracked lips and the glimpse of his even white teeth offered a startling contrast to his gray and haggard face.

"You know that was strictly for your own good. Chuck and I couldn't take a chance on letting you ride that Fireball horse. You come in for second money on that little mare of mine, didn't you, so why the grudge?"

"Oh, well, skip it for now, but I still mean to get even."

The girl's bright and laughing face belied her words. Her eyes swept the lean disheveled figure with friendly curiosity.

"I'd really forgotten you were ranching up in this country, Buzz," she went on. "Don't tell me it's the cattle business that's causing you to rush around knocking women and children out of your path!"

A strange hardness settled once more on Buzz Foster's usually pleasant face. His heavy black brows drew into a frown above tired red-rimmed eyes.

"Cows and bankers!" he exploded wrathfully. "Or what tries to pass for a banker, I ought to say. You see, my range caught fire two days ago. All my grass went up in smoke. I've got a thousand head of Grade A stock that's due to eat somehow for another month or two. Old Man Eagan would have helped me out pronto with a feed loan or anything else but he's down in San Francisco getting operated on. That smart aleck son of his in there just turned me down cold."

As Foster drew out a cigarette and used up three matches in lighting it, Janie saw that his hands were actually trembling. There was desperate worry as well as fatigue in his eyes and around his tight mouth.

"That's tough, Buzz, plenty tough!" The girl's voice was vibrant with a warm sympathy that was balm to the harassed cowboy's spirit. "I fought grass fires on our Monterey ranch many times and it's pretty awful when you know those flames have you licked. But what are you going to do to save your stock? Can't you rent some pasture?"

"Sure, if I could find any; that's what I'm here for. The Eagans have five or six ranches around this section they've taken over and some of 'em are vacant, not even stocked. But that lame-brained young donkey wouldn't even listen to a proposition. Said he'd let me know in a week or two—which is a banker's way of saying 'No!' Far as he's concerned the Silver Dollar can go plumb to blazes!"

With a violent motion he threw away his half-smoked cigarette.

"Know what I told him?" As he flung out the bitter words Janie saw a little muscle twitch in his cheek. "Know what I'm doing? I'm driving my whole herd straight down Main Street into this bank tomorrow morning. Young Mister Eagan is in the cattle business with both feet and a check book. He'll find out cows have got to eat."

"Don't be foolish, Buzz; you can't do that! It'll make Eagan ridiculous, of course, but the bank will take over the stock and then where are you? That way you'll lose everything."

"What the hell, Old Man Eagan has my notes anyway; he can have the cows, too, and call it quits. I'm sort of keen about my spread out there in the hills but they won't get that—yet. I'll figger on hitting the rodeo circuit again for a spell. Be seein' you at Salinas, kid, I mean, Miss Harris!"

A glimmer of the old easy grin swept his gaunt face as he moved away from the bank façade where they had been standing.

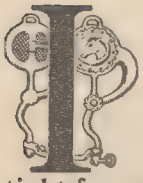
"But wait, Janie!" He swung about suddenly and halted. "You didn't say what you're doing around these parts. Just passing through or—"

The girl turned with her hand on the door. "My aunt and I came up for a few weeks while poor Mr. Eagan is in the hospital," she explained amiably. "She is his third or fourth cousin by marriage. And, by the way, that lame-brained young donkey you've been cuss-

in' out is the man I'm going to marry."

Long after she had disappeared within, Buzz Foster remained staring stupidly until the indigant glare of a fat woman trying to edge through the revolving door roused him to his surroundings.

II



NSIDE Henry Eagan's private office Jane Harris perched on the glass-topped desk and smiled sweetly at Henry, Junior. That young man's thin, tight face wore no answering smile; indeed, a slight frown creased his forehead as he regarded her gravely through horn-rimmed spectacles. He fumbled nervously with his elegant tie for a moment and then cleared his throat.

"I think, my dear, I've told you about wearing clothes like that while you're in Banner City. After all, you know how people feel about a banker's wife. She has a certain position—"

"Oh, Henry, don't act like a stuffed owl just because your dad left you in charge here! Besides, I'm not a banker's wife, yet, and I've been riding. In fact, that's what I want to see you about."

"Yes?" said Henry cautiously.

"After you agreed last night I could practice my roping stunts at your Hillview ranch that old dragon you've got as a caretaker wouldn't even let me get off my horse or go near the house this morning. He said I'd have to bring a written order from you. I told him I didn't intend to high-jack your barbed wire fences or 1870 saddles, that I just wanted to practice a bit for my farewell rodeo appearance. But the stubborn old walrus never weakened."

Henry's face slipped a trifle and he smiled in spite of himself.

"Jake's a regular top sergeant for orders," he admitted. "You see, every time a tramp cowboy rides past that ranch he drops in for a meal. They had the place spotted as a hotel for grubliners before I got hold of it, so I told Jake not to let anyone stop without my written instructions. I'd forgotten he might apply the rule to you."

"I see. Well, draw up a legal document or something so I can get into the house. Aunt Margaret and I thought we'd stay out there for a few days or a week, providing you don't mind."

A definite look of relief settled on Henry's serious face.

"No; in fact, I'd—er, be rather glad. I never thought this work here would keep me tied up until all hours of the evening and, besides, tomorrow the auditors are coming. I was afraid you and Cousin Margaret would think I was neglecting you after you were kind enough to come—"

"You're taking all this too seriously, Henry," Janie interrupted impatiently. "Your father gets more fun out of this racket than you seem to. After all, if people come in for a chunk of cash for some good purpose like buying hay or renting pasture or something, why not give it to them?"

Henry was thoroughly shocked. He stared at Janie as if he thought she had taken sudden leave of her senses, then looked about a little wildly, wondering if the frosted glass partition was really soundproof.

"You don't understand business, my dear," he said, nervously. "In Banner City you can't talk so—so frivolously. A banker's wife must—"

"All right, Henry; skip it!" Janie slid off the desk. "How about that note to get me past your grumpy old watchdog?"

While Henry scratched busily for a few moments, Janie regarded him thoughtfully.

"You said last night," she began tentatively, "this Hillview ranch is just a liability and you want to sell as soon as you find a buyer. But I like it tremendously, Henry. Would you mind—say, after we are married—if I sort of took it over?"

She looked away hastily as Henry, waving the note in the air, came toward her smiling.

"No, I wouldn't mind," he said generously. "Maybe then when Dad gets back from the hospital you'll stop stalling about marrying me and be sensible. I've been trying to sell that darned place for two years, anyway. So consider it yours, sweet."

He bent toward her and Janie, flushing hotly, turned her cheek for his kiss while she reached for the note.

"Th-thanks. I'll ride in soon to report on Jake's blood pressure. And when you and banking can stand a separation come along out and I'll show you my latest rope trick."

"Well, if that sort of thing makes you happy, my dear, maybe I shouldn't criticize. But, you know, a banker's wife. . . ."

"Sounds like a swell speech, Henry; save it for the Banner City sewing circle. I'll run along now so you can get back to roping in the dollars. 'Bye!"

The next hour was a whirlwind of activity for Janie Harris. But first she returned the horse she had been riding to Johnny Rand, proprietor of the livery stable which also housed the town's only garage.

She had become good friends with this old ex-cowman during the two weeks or more since her arrival in Banner City upon discovering that his reminiscences included many old-timers who had been intimates of her father.

As she handed him over the lines she inquired abruptly, although a bit breathlessly.

"Where's the Silver Dollar spread, Johnny? Anywhere near Eagan's Hillview ranch?"

"About two ridges or so beyond, if you stick to what our county supervisors call a road. Plenty short cuts, of course, but not for strangers."

Johnny Rand stripped a plug of tobacco and worried the shavings about in the palm of a gnarled old hand.

"Buzz Foster owns it now," he continued. "At least, he's tryin' to, spite of more hard luck than I ever heard tell of even in the cow country. Anthrax first, 'cept there's some still say it was a poisoned spring. And now his whole feed's just gone up in smoke. He's a plenty upstandin' kid, that Buzz, only a mite too hot-headed. Say, you ought to know him from down Salinas way."

"Yes, I do know him. And we happened to meet just now at the bank. It seems Henry has turned him down for a loan and so I've been wondering—Draw me a little map how to reach the Silver Dollar, please, Johnny. I can't resist rushing off to a fire even when it's out."

Rand chuckled, his eyes twinkling at her shrewdly from their network of leathery wrinkles. He fished in his pockets for a stub of pencil and tore a blank leaf from a worn and thumbed notebook.

"It'd be a durn shame for this country to lose a good cowman like Foster. He could have my ranch in a minute if it wasn't already leased out. Seein' as you have considerable influence with young Eagan, Miss Janie, why don't you talk him into puttin' them Silver Dollar critters on Hillview range for a spell?"

"Maybe I will," Janie answered enigmatically, and listened carefully while he explained the crude sketch he had drawn.

III

LATER, buying supplies and stowing packages in every corner of her small coupé, Janie managed to overrule Aunt Margaret's faintly puzzled protests at her breathless and unseemly haste. They left Banner City swiftly behind them. Hillview ranch was not more than six miles out and, shortly after three o'clock, they turned off the country road to follow a narrow rutted lane, a long slow grade that ran between fences and rose gently to a rim of foothills.

On both sides the grass was sunbrowned and luxuriantly thick, the rolling terrain being occasionally dotted with hoary moss-draped oaks and gashed by small naked arroyos.

At the sight of this tall rich hay, bending gracefully as a little breeze rippled through it, Janie felt a surge of hot indignation remembering young Eagan's curt refusal of it to Buzz Foster.

"Maybe I won't make a good banker's wife, after all, Aunt Margaret," she announced thoughtfully, as they swung around the last curve and glimpsed a rambling brown house with a tall water tower and clustered outbuildings, spread over the knoll just above them.

While Janie's attention was fixed on the closed gate a short distance ahead, her aunt glanced sharply at her small unusually anxious face.

"Maybe you won't, dear," she said, mildly. "The Eagan branch happens to be the only money-makers in our whole family. All the rest of us just somehow enjoyed a lot of living."

"Like Dad. What a swell cowman and a grand guy he was!" Janie sighed worriedly. "I keep thinking how he'd feel about things. . . ."

She jumped out to open the gate, then drove the car through and returned to close it after her. Now the path ran uphill for several hundred feet and stopped abruptly at the side porch of the old house.

Jake Rooney regarded them with impersonal hostility from a creaking rocker.

Smilingly, Janie proffered the note and he opened it in silence. Henry had written:

"Jake:

"Miss Harris is my future wife. While at Hillview she is to have complete charge and do whatever she wishes.

"Henry Eagan, Jr."

The old man glanced up at her and Janie was surprised to see a glimmer of smile on his face. His eyes crinkled humorously under bushy white brows.

"No hard feelin's, Miss. I'm only too glad you're takin' over. My rheumatiz has been thumpin' bad for more'n a week and I'm goin' straight to my bunk and stay there till it's better. Ain't nothin' kin sour a body's disposition like rheumatiz."

"Oh, Jake, can't we do something for you? You stay in bed and my aunt and I will fix your meals and bring them to you, won't we, Aunt Margaret?"

With a muttered word of thanks the caretaker hobbled painfully toward the double row of pepper trees that shaded the long bunkhouse.

Swiftly then Janie unpacked, helped her aunt arrange the kitchen and checked up on the wood-box. As soon as she could, with a hasty word of explanation that she wanted to try out a horse during the few hours remaining before supper, she fled toward the corral.

She threw a saddle over a sturdy little roan, climbed aboard and took Johnny Rand's penciled map from her pocket to study it thoughtfully for a few minutes.

Outside the ranch gate she swung uphill to the crest, followed the rim for a brief distance and then dipped across a pocket-size valley, little more than a saddle, to another ridge. Topping this, she halted to look down on the desolate scene below, a scene which sent a sickening wave of sadness over her.

There it lay, this sheltered valley between the bare rugged hills that rimmed it, like a huge empty bowl that had been blackened and seared. Several faint curls of smoke still threaded upward from stubbornly burning logs or stumps.

The Silver Dollar ranch house, so Rand had informed her, was located on a little bench at one side of the valley where a tiny creek tumbled out of a narrow gorge. Riding down the slope, the last rays of sunlight touched the tin roof of a small compact cabin below her. But when she turned into the yard only silence greeted her.

A childish disappointment tugged at Janie's throat. Along the entire burnt range there had been no sign of life; but somehow, she couldn't explain why, she had felt certain Buzz Foster must be here, holding his stock near the ranch headquarters while he worked out a solution of his feed problem.

Janie remembered suddenly his absurd threat that morning and with a little panicky giggle wondered if he had

really started the cows toward Banner City and Eagan's bank. She glanced nervously at her watch and then toward the purple ridge where an orange-red arc of the fast-setting sun was still visible.

She couldn't stop now, for darkness crept early between these crouching hills. She pushed the roan at a fast clip down the plainly marked trail which somewhere must intersect the road from Banner City.

Buzz Foster, riding back alone toward his cabin, drew in his horse with an expression of complete bewilderment at the sight of Janie Harris loping down the grade toward him. That unaccountable sense of loss her last casual words about her marriage had awakened, was still with him.

"You do it with mirrors, I suppose," he remarked, unsmiling. "First I stumble over you at Eagan's and here you are popping out from behind a rock. Is this a little private survey for Junior?"

"That's plain dumb but I haven't time now to tell you how many kinds of an idiot you are," Janie declared hotly. "Where are the cows? What have you done with them?"

"Holed up a few miles down the canyon; the last open country we could use between here and Banner City. Who wants to know?"

"I do, of course. Buzz, you can't go through with that crazy scheme of driving them to the bank. You're not turning your outfit over to the Eagans. I won't let you."

Buzz raised his eyebrows and managed a sarcastic grin.

"What a cute joke coming from the future Mrs. Eagan! How're you stopping me?"

"I've got a place for the cows, Buzz. Hillview Ranch. I—I'm renting it to you until you sell or get feed somewhere. Ride back now with me and start the bunch moving. They can be on grass tonight."

"Hillview? But that's the place I wanted to rent from Eagan! He wouldn't let me have it. He said—"

"He changed his mind—or I changed it for him," Janie explained recklessly. "I'm running the place, Buzz, so it's mine to rent. Don't you believe me? You can come over and talk to Aunt Margaret or—or even Jake."

"Oh, I believe you; too damn much. But I'm not having any, see? I suppose you hopped in there this morning and worked your charm on that human cash register, so just for the little woman's sake he's putting on an act. The future Mrs. Banker dispensing charity. Hell, it ought to make the Sunday papers, but I'm still not having any! He can give you my cows tomorrow morning for a wedding present and you can graze 'em at Hillview yourself."

He turned off the trail as if to pass her and Janie in sheer fury snatched at his lines. The two startled horses danced restlessly.

"Buzz Foster, you fool! You're a bigger crack-brained donkey than Henry Eagan! You—you—"

Janie's exasperated outburst halted suddenly. She dropped both reins, put her hands over her tired eyes while tears of fatigue and exasperation trickled down her cheeks.

"Go ahead and lose 'em, then; why should I care?" she choked, wearily. "We—Aunt Margaret and I—needed the rent from that range. It would help out with a little income for us. But what's the use? We'll just stay broke until I win some prize money or something!"

Foster urged his horse close to the roan and drew Janie's hands into both his own.

"Why didn't you say it was like that, kid?" he said gruffly. "I guess I blew my top without knowing all the facts. But when I think of you and him—aw, let's forget everything and start over! It's a deal, Miss Harris. I'll—"

"You can drive 'em across right now, can't you, Buzz?" Janie dabbed at her eyes. "Then we can start counting the rent from today, don't you see?"

"Gosh, you sure have an eye to business once you get going. Yeah, I guess we can get 'em in tonight. You rode over

across the ridge but there's a short cut to Hillview only a few miles from where we're holding 'em."

Janie squinted at her wrist watch in consternation.

"Almost six o'clock! I've got to dash back or my aunt will worry. What's the quickest way out of here?"

"Down this canyon; I'll go along with you or you wouldn't find Hillview before dark. About that rent, I'll raise some of it tomorrow. Then I'll ship earlier than I figured so—"

"Oh, we'll settle all that later when we see how long the cows stay there."

"Henry can't go back on his word!" she thought to herself fiercely. "He wrote it and he said it. 'Consider it yours' . . . Hillview's mine until those cows are fed!"

She reached the ranch with Buzz Foster to find an anxious Aunt Margaret and an excellent supper in wait. That amiable lady beamed on the cowboy whom she had previously met at several rodeo events with her niece. He yielded to her cordial invitation to join them at the meal but ate hastily, impatient to return to camp and, with the aid of his two cowboys, get the hungry animals inside Hillview fences that evening.

Janie's aunt was plainly puzzled at the guest's attitude toward the girl. They were like a pair of strangers engaged in a not too pleasant business deal. She remembered past summers when Foster, his friend, Chuck Wiggins, her niece and the rest of a lively group had enjoyed grand fun together. Something must have happened; but she asked no questions.

After thanking them both gravely, Buzz rode away in the subdued twilight and it was then that Janie confessed the full sum of her activities.

"I don't see that you've done anything really wrong, my dear," Aunt Margaret considered thoughtfully. "What's Henry got to lose? A careless hitch-hiker with a cigarette could send his whole range up in smoke overnight. This way you're bound to collect something for him sooner or later. Whatever it was that made him turn Foster down so flat, is no reason for them critters to starve. You and I both know cows always eat first and regular in a rancher's family.

"Of course," she concluded, sloshing the mop about vigorously in the steaming dishpan, "you *did* give that Foster chap a wrong impression about our finances. He'd never accepted if he hadn't thought you were sort of Henry's agent and due to collect a commission. Wouldn't surprise me if he robbed the bank tonight to get us that rent!"

IV

EARLY morning sun poured into Janie's room and she ran to the window, her spirits lifted until she was almost happy. For dotting the entire slope below the house, posed singly and in bunched groups on the rich brown carpet rising to the rimrock, were Silver Dollar's sleek white-faced cattle. With necks arched to the succulent grass, they seemed motionless as a set of cardboard figures.

Later that morning, after calling on old Jake whom she found in undeniable pain but hugely enjoying the novelty of Aunt Margaret's cooking, Janie rode along the fence line toward the ridge.

Cows, cows, cows! Hundreds of 'em and all eating their heads off! All getting fat so Buzz Foster wouldn't have to lose his outfit. Janie paused at this point in her exultant, purring contentment.

It wasn't just because of Buzz Foster that she had schemed like this; risked a serious clash, maybe a losing battle with Henry Eagan when he found out. She told herself she would have done exactly the same for any other hard-pressed cow outfit caught in a like predicament—and really believed it!

"I'm just a Girl Scout at heart and never had a chance to prove it," she argued defensively.

Along the ridge she found Foster's two helpers, the youthful Larson brothers, busily repairing a section of fence

that had sagged. Buzz would be back before nightfall, they told her.

It was some time after supper when he swung off his horse at the Hillview porch, but Aunt Margaret, with remarkable foresight, had a plate of food warming in the oven for him.

Standing at the kitchen table Buzz drew out a fistful of bills, one hundred dollars in all, and placed them in front of Janie.

"First installment on that feed, Miss Harris," he said, briskly impersonal. "I'll have another payment in a week or so and settle up the balance when we pull out of here."

No reason for her to know that two more of his prized silver-mounted saddles were stacked in a corner at Johnny Rand's livery stable as security for this hundred dollars.

"You keep 'em for me, Johnny," he had insisted that morning. "If I can't pay you back, at least the Eagans won't get these, too."

Behind his mask of almost hostile reserve he felt a warm glow of satisfaction that Janie and her aunt were to have part of the money.

The girl, glancing up at him, flushed guiltily and then looked appealingly at her aunt.

"Write a receipt for that payment, dear; no telling when he might need it," that lady chimed in quickly. "And now sit down and eat, Buzz."

Valiantly, Aunt Margaret maintained a lively conversation. Janie was silent and the visitor almost so, except when he addressed her with studied politeness.

Unable to bear this rigid constraint any longer, after a while she managed to slip away.

From her own room she listened miserably to her aunt's bright gentle voice and to Foster's now more frequent drawling baritone and occasional deep chuckle. She felt an impulse to shrink from this cloud of impending doom hovering over her. For there was something about Buzz Foster's frozen reserve that shook her strangely.

She looked back on the six carefree years, ever since she was seventeen, when they had met again and again during Salinas "Big Week." And always during that dizzy, whirling, colorful holiday there had been her own little crowd, dancing, laughing, arguing, and battling joyously in the daily events, with reckless and impulsive Buzz Foster one of the gayest.

Since the last rodeo, however, her father had died; their Monterey ranch was sold. She had finally said a reluctant "Yes" when Henry (his father, too, who approved of her so heartily) had urged her.

Everything was changed. There would be no more fun at Salinas. But she had insisted on going back to compete for the last time; she would show Henry Eagan that she wasn't a banker's wife—yet!

"See you at Salinas, Kid!" Buzz had said.

He wouldn't, though. Buzz Foster wouldn't see her as in those other years. For he hated the Eagans and now—now she was included in that hate.

Their long friendship! In one day, in an hour, he could blot it out and treat her like a stranger. "Like a particularly obnoxious landlady!" Janie raged, weeping silently. . . .

On Wednesday, she threw herself into the dizzy gyrations of her roping practice with reckless abandon. Aunt Margaret protested mildly at her long and strenuous workout but to no avail. And after supper, tired to the point of exhaustion, she stumbled to her room and fell asleep quickly.

At breakfast, while reporting casually the absence of callers at Hillview the night before, her aunt failed to add that she had invited Buzz Foster to have supper with them that evening.

Thus, toward late afternoon, Janie, lithe and graceful as a toe dancer and holding an almost uncanny mastery over the whizzing snake-like lariat, was just concluding an exciting display of loops and circles when he rode into the yard.

"That was great stuff, kid!" Buzz drew up beside her and grinned approv-

ingly with all his old-time warmth. "You'll slay 'em this year! I mean to take every bet I can get hold of that you'll hit first place with that fancy work."

"Do you really believe I have a chance, Buzz? I haven't practiced for months."

They chatted. For a little while at least the bitterness of the past few days was completely erased.

Aunt Margaret, watching as they approached the kitchen porch arguing animatedly, smiled a little secret smile of approval.

V

IN THIS same Thursday evening, for the first time since the elder Eagan's departure to the San Francisco hospital, no lights burned in the Banner City bank.

The auditors had finished and young Henry had consigned a mass of finely printed papers, over which he had been fretting worriedly, to the top drawer of his desk and locked it. He was suddenly weary of too much self-imposed authority and responsibility.

Frankly hungry for a sight of Janie Harris, he decided it was her gay presence he missed more than he had thought possible. He indulged recklessly in a box of drugstore candy for her. It struck him forcibly that Banner City sadly lacked a florist shop. He would have liked a red carnation for his lapel; perhaps even a few posies for Janie.

He hoped she would admire his new suit and tie; Henry was inordinately proud of his taste in clothes.

Driving his coupé carefully as always toward Hillview, his thoughts turned automatically toward a couple of loans that should produce a sizeable interest on the morrow. In fact, he was so engrossed that he failed completely to notice anything unusual about the landscape until he was almost at the ranch gate.

He stopped the car then with a jerk and stared open-mouthed. His range was dotted with hundreds (it seemed to Henry, thousands) of white-faced cows!

Not *his* cows, certainly—but cows that were quite plainly feeding on *his* grass!

Muttering aloud in a rising fury he tore at the gate savagely, hurtled his car through and drove on without stopping.

The coupé was halted in a spray of gravel and Henry hopped up the steps and wrenched open the kitchen door.

Unfortunately for his mounting blood pressure, Janie's chances of success at the forthcoming rodeo were under discussion and the three in the kitchen were laughing excitedly and lifting thick cups of steaming coffee in answer to Buzz Foster's toast of "Here's good luck and top money!"

"Jane!" Henry burst out hoarsely. "What's the meaning of all this? Cattle on *my* range! This cowpuncher—are those your cows, Foster? I told you I wouldn't rent to you!"

The surprised cowboy got to his feet slowly and looked from Janie to Eagan and back again in growing bewilderment.

"But I thought it was all settled! I mean, Miss Harris said—" Foster stopped abruptly, turned a puzzled frown toward the girl. "O.K., kid; take it from there before I put the saddle on the wrong horse! What's the idea?"

Janie had also risen.

"It's all right, Buzz; and you, Henry, stop trying to look like Boris Karloff," she said airily, hiding an inward quaking. "No harm's been done; I merely rented your range that was going to waste. You'll get paid for it. I guess you didn't understand when Buzz was in to see you that cows can't be allowed to starve."

"*His* can!" Henry's ragged voice rose almost to a shriek. "I didn't rent to Foster on purpose! Let him lose his cows and his ranch, too, for all the help he'll ever get from me! Maybe then he'll go back to Oregon where he came from!"

"Why, you little snake!" Buzz Foster gasped in sheer amazement and towered above the enraged banker, his hard fists clenched. But Janie's outflung arm stopped him for the moment while Henry Eagan, beside himself now with jealous anger, bared the deep bitter secret so long hidden beneath his smooth and faultless exterior.

"Did you think I couldn't see he was in love with you last summer at Salinas?" he shouted wildly at the astonished girl. "I knew it all right in spite of both of you trying to hide it! But I got you away from him, that's what I did! I've got you and now—now I mean to freeze him out of Banner City before you and I—"

His tirade stopped abruptly and he made a visible effort to recapture his poise. He glanced uneasily from Janie to Buzz Foster as these two stared at each other dazedly for a long moment.

"I blame you, Foster, for talking Jane into something you knew I already disapproved of," Henry went on in his best banker's voice. "As my future wife, she didn't realize—but that's neither here nor there. I'll give you one hour to start moving those cows off my range or be arrested for trespassing. And you'll get a bill for damages that'll look like the national debt."

"Henry Eagan, you don't even know what you're talking about!" Janie broke in, furiously. "It was my fault entirely! I *told* Buzz, I forced him to—"

"Wait a minute, Miss Harris," Foster interrupted quietly, almost softly. "Eagan's right. He's even right about two things. One of them is I owe him a whopping debt. I got an urge to pay a little something on account—now!"

Deliberately, he crushed out his cigarette on top of the stove and turned toward the banker. His left hand grasped Henry's new striped tie in a firm grip while the flattened palm of his right connected with a resounding smack against Eagan's smooth cheek.

Reversing his grip he duplicated the stingingly contemptuous blow with his left hand. White-faced and trembling, his arrogance fled, Eagan offered no resistance except to sputter breathlessly.

Still silent, his face unreadable, Buzz Foster's level gaze met Janie's frightened eyes. Then he reached for his hat and strode from the house.

Some fifteen minutes later, Henry's car shot out of the ranch gate and Janie, quite spent and exhausted from the tirade she had poured on the head of the luckless banker, fell weeping into Aunt Margaret's sympathetic arms.

For hours that night she lay staring into the darkness, listening to the sharp *"Hup! Hup!"* of the Larson boys as they rounded up Silver Dollar's reluctant cows. The animals streamed into the narrow open lane while Buzz Foster, his lips parting occasionally in a reckless grin which held no hint of mirth, tallied them through the ranch gate.

At breakfast, and a very late one, too, for Hillview, a preposterous thought suddenly struck Janie head-on. She set her coffee cup down with a bang.

"I wonder if he really would!" she gasped, with horrified eyes raised to her aunt's.

"Would what?" said that patient lady, but Janie had fled from the table.

While she got into brown slacks and tan sweater and poked under the carpet for the money Buzz Foster had paid over for range rent, she explained jerkily to Aunt Margaret her growing suspicions.

By the time her small car arrived near the outskirts of Banner City her fears were confirmed. She swung into a back street that ran past the livery stable at the other end of town, vowing fiercely that old Johnny Rand must help her. They must do something before it was too late.

VI

NYONE in Banner City would have assured you that the town was quite accustomed to cattle drives; in the spring, for instance, changing from winter range in

the valley to the hills, or when, on occasion, stock was driven down to the pens at the railroad siding for loading on the night freight. But, of course, the animals were always held to the dusty little-used roads on the outskirts.

Thus when Buzz Foster turned into Main street that morning with Ole Larson edging through the herd from his position on point to reach him, old Constable Marcus yelled at them good-naturedly.

"Cows for the bank!" Buzz explained shortly. "I'm delivering 'em to Eagan."

The explanation was as puzzling as it was brief but Marcus had to be satisfied. After all, Old Man Eagan just about owned the town, didn't he?

The business center circled about a neat open plaza and here the herd flowed to a stop. Buzz had held back at the entrance of town to see that the entire cavalcade moved in while both Larsons, stolid and matter-of-fact as though on the open range, now stationed themselves to block any exit on the far side.

It seemed purely accidental that almost half of the herd piled up squarely in front of the Eagan bank which had just opened for the day's business, and here they milled restlessly.

Henry, still showing the effects of last night's mental and physical upsets, was informed by his excited assistants of the rumpus out in front and came hurriedly from his private office.

Wishing fervently there was some kind of a law to liquidate people like Buzz Foster, he hastily ordered the steel doors slammed. Unfortunately, this was an instant too late to prevent a bawling young beef critter from being catapulted into the bank where it landed almost at Henry's feet. The animal had become wedged somehow in the revolving door, and the pressure of its nudging, scrambling mates had done the rest.

A stubby cowpuncher who had just told Henry he couldn't pay his interest, made a flying leap, bulldogged the calf and sat on its head until a rope was found somewhere to tie it up.

Meanwhile, Eagan, as frenzied as a locoed calf himself, rushed nervously from one window to the other while the deafening noise from the plaza grew in volume.

In just a few short minutes, even before the last cows had romped into Main Street, a score or more volunteer cowboys were riding herd for the Silver Dollar. The Larsons had dropped a few brief words and the news spread like wildfire among gleeful citizens gazing from windows and porches that "a bunch o' hungry beef was figgerin' to get a square meal off of Henry."

Cows were grazing off the small square lawn that marked the center of the plaza; more cows were sampling the petunia bed in front of the church and at least a hundred or so stampeded the drinking fountain.

The bawling and bellowing rose in waves that tortured the eardrums. Banner City was a bedlam—and loved it! The town hadn't enjoyed such a wave of excitement since Farley dedicated the post-office.

Buzz Foster, who had waited to see the last of the stock he was so soon to lose safely into Main street, and then had been delayed by various acquaintances who were frankly curious to know what it was all about, now set his horse's head toward the bank. He felt a savage and reckless satisfaction in giving Henry Eagan formal notice that the cows were now in his possession.

While Banner City looked on and laughed he meant to demand his canceled notes in exchange. Then at Ed Baker's saloon he'd burn the notes; they'd go up in smoke just like his range; like his deep and hidden dreams. . . .

What the hell! He'd get very, very drunk at Ed Baker's before he rode north without a backward glance at Banner City. He was beyond caring about anything and quite suddenly he knew why. His hammering pulses beat out the insistent refrain:

"Janie Harris and Eagan! Mrs. Henry Eagan—Janie. . . ."

In the meantime, at Johnny Rand's

livery stable that gentleman was just replacing the telephone receiver on its hook, and then Jane Harris brought her car to a stop on the narrow concrete ramp in front of the gas pump. He came toward her, grinning widely.

"A feller was jest tellin' me what that crazy Buzz Foster is up to now. You want a hoss, I s'pose, to git over there and see the fun."

"Listen, Johnny, he is crazy to throw aside all his holdings, everything he's worked for, like this. It's not only the cows; he's quitting the Silver Dollar, too. I know it! He's quitting this country for good just because—because of Henry Eagan and me!"

Tears welled into Janie's brown eyes and choked her voice.

"Help me, Johnny; I don't know anyone else around here to ask. *I'm* leaving here instead of Buzz Foster. You've got to find him and make him stay."

For forty of his sixty years Johnny Rand had been putty in the hands of any pretty girl in distress; particularly when the girl was as pretty as Janie Harris.

"My stars!" he exclaimed, worriedly. "I didn't know it was like that, Miss Janie. We're used to them reckless young squirts lammin' off when they feel like it; done it myself, in my time, jest like Buzz. Here today and somewheres else tomorrow. What do you want me to do?"

"Help me find some rangeland for rent; there must be some around here. I've got a thousand dollars due me on the fifteenth from my ranch down in Monterey. I'll sign it over to you for rent or hay—anything! Only Buzz mustn't know. When he sells his beef you can collect and send the money back to me."

"Lemme see, now," Johnny ruminated thoughtfully and reached for the telephone. "Doc Willis was tellin' me last week about a three-way deal he's got with the Hall brothers. Mebbe we can tie in there, 'though them Halls are tough hombres to bargain with."

Janie concealed her impatience somehow during the conversation with Doc Willis. It was astonishingly brief, for few words were necessary for these men. To the anxious girl, however, the moments stretched into an eternity.

At last Rand stood up and reached for his battered, greasy sombrero.

"That'll fix things," he commented, "Unless Buzz is plumb mulish."

"Remember not to mention my name!" Janie begged worriedly. "I'll mail you the check from Monterey. We're leaving as soon as I pick up the rest of my things at the Eagan house and go back for my aunt."

Leaving the little office, she halted abruptly at the door.

"I almost forgot about this money that belongs to Buzz as long as he didn't use the Hillview range. Will you give it to him, please?"

She thrust the bills into Johnny's hands and fled just as the telephone sent out a shrill summons. It was some minutes after her departure before Rand was again free but at last he swung onto his horse that was standing already saddled and rode toward the melee in Main street.

Half a block from the bank, edging his horse slowly through the crush, he reached the side of Buzz Foster. Johnny seized his arm.

"I got a message for you, Buzz," he shouted above the din. "Listen, feller, you ain't handin' this beef nor anything else over to the Eagans. Me and Doc Willis got a deal figgered out with the Hall brothers so you can turn your cows onto their west range for a spell. First cash payment is already guaranteed."

"Much obliged, Johnny; that's swell of you and Doc, but it's no use. I'm driftin' for keeps. I'm through here."

"Like hell you are! Not when I'm stuck with three of your saddles! Now, you pull in your ears and talk sense, Buzz. Old Man Eagan will rough that kid of his up plenty for puttin' you in a hole. And anyway this town'll laugh him outa here for a long spell when his dad gets back. Send the word over there to Larson to head these critters

toward the Hall ranch and—cripes, I 'most forgot! Here's a hundred bucks I was told to give you."

"Me?"

"Yeah; that little Miss Harris wanted to return your rent before she left town. She's clearin' out of Eagan's; prob'ly already on her way back to Hillview to pack. Seems her and her aunt are goin' back south right pronto and for good!"

Buzz Foster's face did not relax its grim hardness. He shoved the bills into his shirt pocket and eased his horse ahead cautiously.

"Wait here for me, Johnny. I'll take you up on that feed deal, after all."

In a few minutes he was back again and the two rode with what haste they could through the last of the herd into a side road. Already up at the plaza, the first cows were being hazed through the bottleneck. Buzz called to a grinning cowboy whom he knew and after brief instructions the horseman turned to gather in the stragglers and keep them moving along behind the released herd.

"When was Miss Harris here?" Foster inquired abruptly of Rand. "How much time have I got to catch 'em at Hillview?"

Johnny glanced at a ponderous silver timepiece with exasperating slowness.

"Lemme see," he mused. "She left for Eagan's house, and I had to answer that dratted phone, then crawl through them cows. You wasted a lot of time arguin'—"

But at this point he found himself talking to thin air. With a satisfied grin on his weathered face he watched the little puffs of dust thrown up by Foster's fast-stepping horse until Buzz swung around Jackson's huge barn into the county road and was lost to view.

Some two or three miles distant a furious and very tired young woman was seated on the running-board of her car, staring disconsolately at this same empty road.

It was a toss-up, Janie Harris decided, whether to trudge back to Banner City for the gasoline she found herself so completely out of, or go on to Hillview where an extra supply was always on hand.

It was all Buzz Foster's fault anyway! If it wasn't for him and his stupid cows. . . .

The pounding of hoofs roused her and she jumped to her feet at the sight of this rider and his sweating horse.

"What do *you* want?" Janie planted a pair of small fists on her hips and glared. "Did you miss that Oregon road, Mister Buzz Foster, or is there something else you aim to hand over to the Eagans before you quit the country?"

Foster slid off his horse and stood fumbling with the lines for a few moments.

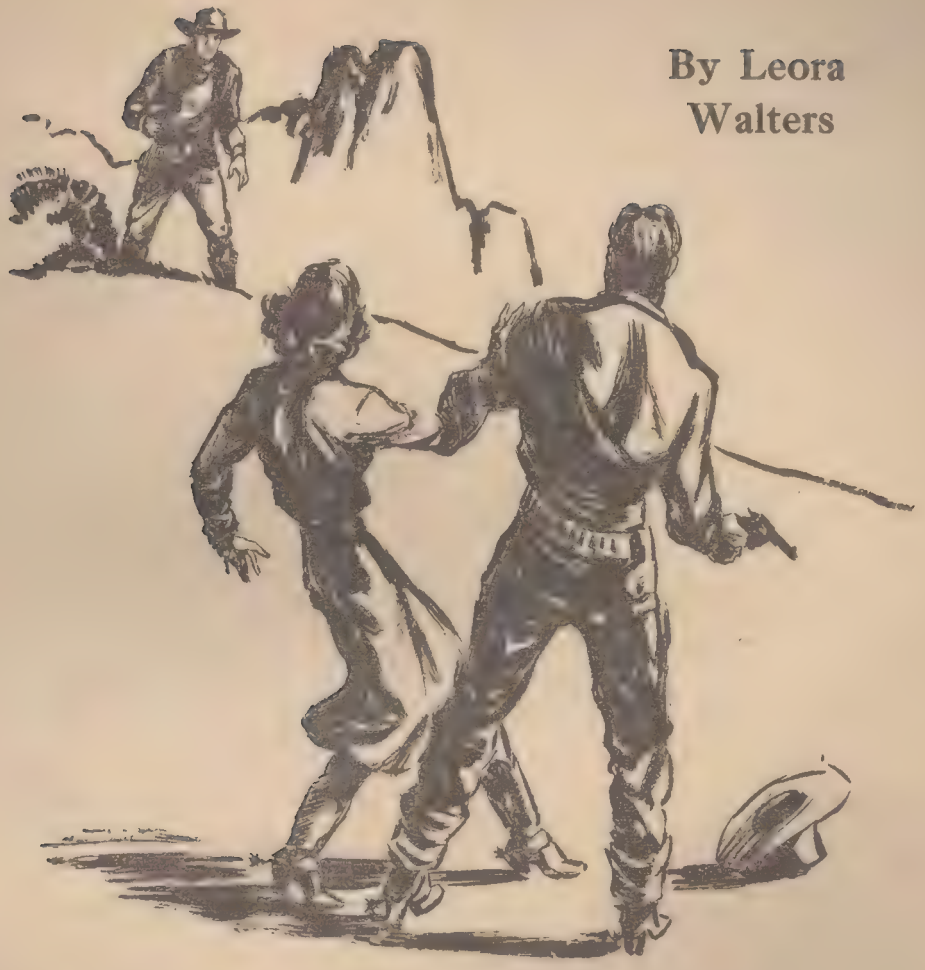
"Yes—and no!" he said then, slowly.

Janie frowned uncertainly at his tight, hard-bitten face and moved back a step as he came nearer. Buzz reached out then and drew her to him roughly. She was very small and very still in the circle of his arms.

"Kid, you're a little fool not to marry that banker," he informed her, hoarsely. "As a cowman's wife, you won't—"

"Don't tell me; let me guess!" Janie grinned suddenly into his anxious eyes. "I won't even eat until the cows are fed! Right?" She reached up two firm fingers to pinch his ear. "Let's see you think up a really *good* reason why you shouldn't kiss me."

Buzz Foster wasted no time in thinking; he already knew there wasn't any reason.



By Leora Walters

Lesson in Love

Eve knew anguish and bitterness when the man she loved left her. She had a lesson in faith to learn—and she learned it to the roar of sixguns.

WITH THE spring breeze cooling her face, an attractive, oval face dominated by a pair of wide-set hazel eyes, Eve Robertson rode down the slope of the big ridge that had brought her into sight of the Spear H ranch house. In one hand she carried a quart jar of chicken broth to tempt the ever-waning appetite of old George Cantrell, and in her heart she carried the dark shadow of dread—dread that old George might not have survived another night of that fever inflicted upon him by the bite of a woodtick.

Eve passed the Spear H corrals, tied her pony at the porch of the house and was starting inside when Ken Cantrell, tall, broad of shoulder, and with a strained look on his face, emerged from the house and stood there blocking Eve's path.

"Ken!" said the girl visitor in a low voice. "You look like you'd just had a—a hard jolt. Is your father—" Eve didn't dare say it.

"Yeah, he's gone, Eve." Those words came through the young man's tightly clamped lips. "Last night."

"Ken!" Emotion pitched the name in a higher key this time. "Why didn't you send word over home to me? I told you if anything happened. . . ." She took his arm, clung to it for a moment, saying nothing.

Pretty soon she said, "I wish there were something I could do, Ken fellow. Can't you get away from this place for a while? You've been up day and night lately. Your nerves must be—"

"Yes, I'll get away," he said, and there was something bitter and harsh in his tone. "The farther away, the better. For the good of everybody, includin' you, Eve."

With tears glistening in her eyes, Eve said, "You've taken a hard wallop, Ken. But don't be bitter. Don't say things you don't mean, things that hurt me. It's going to be mighty lonely for me while you're away. How I'll be watching the skyline for sight of you riding back to me!"

Clanking spurs sounded in the empty house. Suddenly a big, hard-jawed man, a stranger to Eve, appeared in the doorway. His cold, agate-gray eyes shifted slowly from the girl to Ken. In a deep voice he said:

"Be sure you don't take no horses except that sorrel of yours, Cantrell. Remember our bargain, and see that you keep it!"

"Who is he?" Eve demanded of Ken. "And what's he talking about?"

"He's Otto Strawn," replied Ken slowly. "He's just bought the Spear H outfit, land, cattle, horses and all. He'll be your new neighbor, Eve."

Stunned by that terse statement, she gasped, "You mean that the minute you've inherited this outfit, you've gone and *sold* it?"

"Not quite the minute I inherited it," he answered flatly. "Dad turned the outfit over to me, and legally, when he first took sick. I think maybe he realized that— You saw Lawyer Enderline out here one day. Well, that's what he was doin'. Puttin' this outfit in my name."

Eve remembered that day; but now it was difficult for her to grasp that the Spear H had been taken over by a stranger. She was still standing there, speechless, when Ken, evading her searching hazel eyes upon him, said:

"So long, Eve. So long, Strawn." The tall man turned, walked down the porch steps and headed for the corrals.

Eve's first impulse was to run after him, make him answer a dozen questions she so terribly wanted to fire at him. But his manner, the set of his jaw, the cool casualness of his "So long" froze her in her tracks.

Could this be the same Ken Cantrell who had pledged his love to her? Who, only a week ago, had told Eve that she meant more than life itself to him? Now, without so much as a backward look, this blue-eyed man was leaving, and with the echo of his boot heels drifting back toward the porch. Suddenly two great tears welled up and blurred Eve's vision. For a moment those tears clung to long lashes, then trickled slowly, hotly down her cheeks.

"I wouldn't cry if I was you, girl," grunted big, beetle-browed Otto Strawn. "In losin' one of the Cantrells, you ain't losin' such a hell of a lot."

Eve turned toward the speaker, started to say something. Then she hurried to her pony, swung blindly to the saddle and loped away in the direction of the Robertson home, that modest cabin and few grassy acres cupped in Juniper Draw, some three miles west of the Spear H outfit.

BY THE time she reached home, Eve had gained at least partial victory over the forces hammering at her heart. Her eyes were dry as she rode up to the

cabin, and her firm chin was up. In this hour when her world had threatened to turn topsy-turvy, she had called that staunch ally, Pride. If Ken Cantrell's love for her had not been strong enough to weather the storm of grief which must be upsetting him; if, instead of turning to her for solace, he must run away from things—well, perhaps he wasn't the kind of man Eve had always thought him to be. And perhaps his words of this afternoon were justified: "The farther away, the better."

Old Jim Robertson and his fourteen-year-old son, Davey, were shoeing one of the work horses when Eve rode up. Halting his task, the girl's kindly, hard-working father inquired:

"You're back early today, Eve. How's old George Cantrell?"

Still managing to keep back the tears, Eve told of Cantrell's death.

"Aw, golly!" groaned young Davey, whose big, hazel eyes resembled those of his sister. "And old George was the whitest feller that ever lived! Remember when he bought me these boots I'm wearin'? And how at Christmas he's always come ridin' over here, and fetchin' me—" The lump in Davey's throat grew too big. He turned abruptly and disappeared into the barn.

"Poor kid," said old Jim Robertson. "He's heartbroke now. I guess you are, too, Eve. How's Ken takin' things?"

Briefly Eve related what had occurred over at the Spear H this afternoon. When she had finished, her father said:

"Huh! So Ken's sold the outfit. Good gosh! I've seen a lot of other young bucks go haywire the minute they inherited something, but I didn't think that Ken would! If he starts spreadin' his wings, tryin' to fly high—well, you know what'll happen."

"He's over twenty-one, Dad," said Eve. "He can do as he pleases." She had a notion to add, "No matter how much it hurts anybody else," but she didn't. She kept her chin up, and went into the barn to comfort Davey who had lost his best friend. When Eve succeeded in quieting her brother a little, he said:

"I've never told you or Dad this, Eve, but I might've got in a pretty bad mess once if old George Cantrell hadn't helped me out."

"Why, Davey!" Eve exclaimed. "What was that?"

Brokenly he told her that, a year ago, he had come across a saddled buckskin pony out in the hills, a beautiful little horse that had become frightened and had run away from a land-seeker's wagon behind which he was being led. The horse was two miles away from his owner when Davey found him, and terrible temptation had assailed the lad. He wanted that horse more than he had ever wanted anything. He had roped the pony, was leading him over into the rugged Cedar Breaks country to hide him when old George Cantrell had come jogging over a ridge.

"Then somebody else hove into sight," blurted the moist-eyed youth. "The feller that owned the horse. I was scared half outa my wits when I seen him comin'—and with a rifle in his hands. Well, he yelled at me, but old George stepped right between us. I thought he was goin' to get shot, sure, but George stood his ground. Finally the feller that owned the buckskin lowered his gun, and said he'd take me to the nearest town. Turn me over to the law for attempted horse stealin'."

"Davey!" moaned Eve, thunderstruck at the lad's confession.

"George talked the feller out of it," resumed the lad. "George paid the other feller a twenty-dollar bill and got him to turn me loose. George did some tall talkin' that day for my sake. Then, ridin' home, he sure did some more tall talkin' to me. Told me to think of my family, my friends and my honor 'fore I ever tried anything like that again. I swore to him I'd never try stealin' again. Well, I never have,

Eve. Nor I never will! I'll always remember what old George told me."

"A Robertson—stealing!" Eve said. "We're poor, Davey. But we've always had a code. A code that Dad has lived by, and one that Mother taught us before she died. Oh, I guess everybody thinks we're too straight-laced, but—"

"I can thank George Cantrell for poundin' that code through my head," Davey said. "I'll never forget him as long as I live. He was the kind of man I—I'd like to be when I grow up. As brave as they come and as straight as a string!"

IT WAS a long, almost unendurable week that followed for Eve. A week of unending days, of almost interminable nights, balmy spring nights, when she could think of only one subject—Ken Cantrell. Where had he gone? What was he doing? When, if ever, would he return to the range that was his home?

One evening the lonely, distraught girl had a visitor at the cabin porch in Juniper Draw. It was "Bray" Weaver, a rider for the Spear H, and whose nickname had originated from his proclivity to shout—bray, the other punchers called it—when excited. Weaver swung off his horse, sat down beside Eve there on the tiny porch.

"You ain't lookin' none too happy these days," said the big, sandy-haired man, and with a slightly mocking smile. "Now don't go frettin' about bein' jilted by Ken Cantrell. You're too dogoned purty to go beggin' for love. At least, *I've* allus thought so."

"Has anybody heard from Ken?" inquired the girl.

"Yep. He's been hangin' around Torchlight, and spendin' his money high, wide and handsome. Or, maybe old George's money!" Weaver laughed shortly, harshly. "The danged locoed fool! I allus told you he wasn't half the man his old dad was!"

"You talked so much about Ken that it was a wonder he kept you around the Spear H," Eve remarked casually.

"That's 'cause I'm a danged good hand. Better'n Ken Cantrell ever dared to be," bragged the visitor. "Why, I wasn't even scared to make love to you right under Ken's nose. If he'd ever said anything to me about it, I'd of knocked his ears down. He knowed that. Yeah! That's why he kept his mouth shut."

"I saw you talkin' with Scar Crawford over by Saddle Butte one day when I was riding with Ken," Eve said, still casually. "I wouldn't have too much to do with horse thief Crawford if I were you, Bray. He's bad company."

That silenced the big man for a moment. Then, voice rising, he said, "Oh, no! You didn't see *me* talkin' with Scar Crawford. It must've been somebody else. And listen, girl! Don't start spreadin' no such rumors around this range. Old Strawn, my new boss, wouldn't want me chummin' with Crawford!"

"I didn't think he would," was Eve's reply. "Well, drop in again when you're over this way, Bray."

"Sendin' me on my way for now, eh?" he growled, rising. "Still moonin' over a handsomer gent, one that give you the gate! Well, when you git through moonin', maybe you'll be fit company for a real man. We'll wait and see. Good night!"

Eve watched the Spear H rider gallop away in a huff. Perhaps she shouldn't have mentioned the conversation between Bray and Scar Crawford. Still, that hint might be a warning for Weaver, might help him.

IT WAS nearly a month later that old Jim Robertson sent his daughter over to the Spear H to borrow a pair of wire stretchers. Agate-eyed Otto Strawn himself got the stretchers for Eve, and the girl was starting to ride away when, catching her breath sharply, she halted her pony and stared at

a horseman coming up the creek trail. A lean, wide-shouldered rider—Ken Cantrell.

"Well, look who's comin', boss!" hooted big Bray Weaver, who was patching a pack saddle near the corrals.

"Yeah, I see." Strawn stood there, eyes narrowing a little as he watched the approaching rider.

Conflicting emotions ebbed through Eve as she sat there rigid in her saddle. Her first impulse had been to shout Ken's name and spur toward him with hands of welcome outstretched. But she fought that impulse down.

"Hello, Eve," said Ken, now within talking distance.

"Hello, Ken." There was coolness in Eve's tone.

"What do you want here, Cantrell?" cut in the harsh voice of Otto Strawn.

"A job," was the reply; a humble, abashed reply.

"A job!" hooted Bray Weaver. "There's a picture, eh? A damn fool blows an outfit across a saloon bar, and over poker tables, then comes crawlin' around like a stray dog, beggin' for a job!"

The expression of Ken's deep blue eyes changed as he looked at Weaver and said, "Strawn still owns this outfit, don't he? Or are you runnin' things here now, you loud-mouthed, brayin' jackass?"

"I was hopin' you make the mistake of talkin' to me like that—*after* you wasn't no longer the boss around here!" Bray Weaver moved quickly toward the man on the sorrel horse. "Git off that cayuse and I'll show you in about two minutes—"

"I'm off!" Boot heels jarred to the ground as Ken sprang lithely from the saddle.

Fear constricted Eve's throat as she heard that challenge flung in Ken's face; as she saw him accept it. She started to cry out a warning to Ken, but it was too late. Big Bray Weaver, who apparently had long waited for this moment to display his physical prowess, was rushing at the more slender man. A rush partially halted when Ken's fist cracked swiftly, viciously to the side of his attacker's head.

Weaver swore, straightened up and rushed again, more fiercely this time. His big fist raked hide from Ken's cheek. Another blow barely grazed Ken's set jaw. But both blows were like spurs goading their victim. Lightning swift, a retaliating blow jarred to Weaver's thick chest. Another slashed upward to his mouth, started a red trickle there. Now the bigger man was braying oaths as he rushed into the fray.

A right swing to his nose stopped that rush, staggered him a little. Then Ken Cantrell closed in, battered with rights and lefts the reeling man, blasted Weaver on the jaw and sent him sprawling to the earth where he lay in a limp heap.

"Well," said Ken, breathing hard, "that was maybe worth the long ride back here, if I never get the job, Strawn."

"What makes you think I'd hire you, Cantrell?" growled Strawn.

"We'll talk about that when we're alone," Ken answered. He turned to Eve. "Maybe you won't want me to, girl, but I'd like to come visitin' over at your place tonight."

Her hazel eyes flashed. "Oh, I see! It's different again—now that you've squandered an outfit over the poker tables down at Torchlight! You didn't need me when your pockets were bulging with money. You didn't want to be bothered with me then. But now that you're broke, and coming back, as Bray Weaver said, like a homeless dog—" She stopped. The expression in Ken's eyes stopped her.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I guess I should've known how you'd feel. Well, I'll try not to bother you, Eve, if that's the way you want it." He turned away, started walking slowly toward the spot where Otto Strawn stood.

With tears blurring her vision, Eve whirled her pony and headed homeward. But the hoofbeats of that pony

were like drums beating out the words: "I'll try not to bother you, Eve, if that's the way you want it!" And the expression on that lean, haggard face! A face bruised by Bray Weaver's futile knuckles. . . . A homeless dog! Eve had suffered much in this last month. But she forgot that now. She hated herself for having kicked a homeless dog. . . .

When Eve returned the wire stretchers the following day, she shunned the corral where Ken Cantrell and three other Spear H punchers were branding colts. But she rode close enough to catch some of the jibes directed at Ken. The cowpunchers to whom he had once given orders were now loudly mocking him about being "one of the hands."

"Blow an outfit and then come back to wrassle colts and calves at forty per month!" bandied one Shorty Barth. "The prodigal son returns home, but finds no father to kill the fatted calf for him!"

"He sure must've had a hell of a time, though, while it lasted, down there at Torchlight!" called another, laughing.

One puncher, Eve noticed, took no part in the bandying. He was Bray Weaver, who still bore marks of the beating he had taken.

Eve thanked Otto Strawn for the use of the wire stretchers and added, "Well, I see you hired a man yesterday."

"Yep," he grunted. "After all, he knows every foot of this Spear H range. As a hand, he might be all right to me. As a husband, though, I don't think he'd do for you, girl."

"Why do you say that, Mr. Strawn?"

"Because I expect to be your neighbor for a long time, girl," replied this hard-jawed man with the graying hair. "I'm only tryin' to give you a neighborly tip. But we won't talk about Ken Cantrell any more." Abruptly he turned and headed toward the corrals.

When Eve left the Spear H, she rode fairly close past the corrals where the colt branding was taking place. Although her dark head was held erect, although it appeared that she wasn't concerned about any man in that corral, her heart kept saying: "Come out here and talk to me, Ken. There are so many things to be said. And I don't want to remember you as you looked yesterday when I spoke to you like I did!"

But Ken Cantrell, glancing up for only an instant, turned back to his work again; a gesture that Eve bore with her for the long, unhappy hours that followed. That evening—it was Saturday night—old Jim Robertson and Davey rode to town to get themselves a long-postponed haircut and buy some new overalls. They wanted Eve to come along, but she declined. She didn't want to see the young couples congregated in front of the town dance hall, hear their carefree laughter, and remember all those times she and Ken had waltzed together there. Besides, if Ken *did* come over to see her, which she thought—hoped, perhaps—he eventually would, she wanted to be home.

IM ROBERTSON and Davey had been gone more than an hour now. Eve sat on the porch and watched a big, luminous moon wheel over the shoulder of a cedar-studded ridge and turn to silver the winding course of Juniper Creek. It was June and the wild roses were blooming along that stream. Their perfume, mingling with the resinous scent of sage and cedar, drifted up the draw, filled this little world with a clean, sweet fragrance that Eve Robertson loved.

Yet the lone girl's eyes, haunted with shadows as deep as those patterned by moonlight on the hills, were not on the silver eyes of the creek winking through a willow fringe. Eve's eyes held to the trail leading across the ridge which separated Juniper Draw from the Spear H range.

When, at last, the silhouette of a

rider appeared against the skyline of that ridge, Eve came to her feet and a wild joy surged through her heart. That horse—he was stocking-footed! It was Ken's rangy sorrel! No longer could the girl stand still. She started walking toward the creek. Then, abruptly, she stopped. This rider was not Ken Cantrell. It was Bray Weaver.

"Howdy, Eve," said the Spear H rider, glancing up toward the darkened house. "Your old man and kid brother turn in kinda early, eh?"

"What are you doing on Ken's sorrel horse?" she countered uneasily.

"Followin' Strawn's orders," he said. "Strawn needs a team right away to haul Ken Cantrell to town. The danged fool tried to ride that outlaw horse, old Dynamite, and got throwed against the corral poles purty hard. Maybe he's got a broken back. Acts that way. Oh, not that I'm sorry. But Strawn sent me over here to get a team. All the Spear H drivin' horses busted out of the pasture. We can't round 'em up at night, although I'm supposed to go huntin' 'em when I leave here. And if you'll take that team over to the Spear H—"

"Yes, of course!" Eve moaned. She was trembling. "I'll take our bay team over right away. They're in the corral with the other horses!"

Five minutes later, astride her pony, and leading the team on a fast trot, Eve was on her way to the Spear H. Yet, she had scarcely passed the crest of the big ridge when a rider spurred from a clump of cedars, a rider with a prominent scar across his right cheek —Scar Crawford.

"Just a minute, Miss Robertson," he drawled in his nasal voice. "So you fell for that Cantrell 'accident' all right, did you? Huh! Bray said you'd bust your neck gettin' to Cantrell. Said you still loved the damn fool. Well, you ain't goin' to the Spear H. You're comin' with me and comin' quiet!" His quick hand whisked a gun from its holster.

"What kind of a trick is this?" Eve quavered. She was afraid of this horse thief who had done things worse than steal horses. Crawford was also a murderer. Three notches in his gun attested proudly to that fact.

"A trick to get hold of a good bay team—without causin' no commotion from your old man and brother," came the answer.

"Well, take the team, but let me—"

"I'm takin' you, too," he sneered. "Bray says he ain't pullin' out and leavin' you for Cantrell. You're goin' to do the camp cookin' for me and Bray while we're trailin' a nice bunch of horses across the Blue Mountains up there!" He indicated the mountain range off to the west. "If you don't want a bullet through your pretty head, start leadin' that team slow-like in that direction."

"I'll go," she answered, terror gripping her heart. "I want to live long enough to even a score with that buzzard pal of yours, Bray Weaver. So he's *stolen* Ken's sorrel and hatched up that lie about Strawn wanting a team. And all because he didn't know that Dad—" The girl caught herself. She wouldn't tell this crook that her father and brother had gone to town; that she was all alone tonight.

"It worked," Scar Crawford gloated. "The best part of it is that Bray is supposed to be out huntin' a bunch of horses that busted outa the Spear H pasture. Yeah, and Bray's supposed to be keepin' an eye out for Scar Crawford while he's range ridin' tonight. Hell! Stealin' Spear H stock is easier now than it was when the Cantrells was runnin' the outfit!" He laughed shortly, smugly.

For three miles, miles that led toward the rough Cedar Breaks country, the place where temptation-torn little Davey Robertson had once attempted to conceal a stolen buckskin pony, Eve rode silently and led the team. She was guided by Scar Crawford's drawn gun—a gun that was quick and accurate.

If terror rode with Eve, dark wrath also blazed in her hazel eyes. Wrath against Bray Weaver, the perpetrator of this hideous trick. So Weaver had been Crawford's pal, had worked at the Spear H only for a horse thief's benefit! And now Strawn had sent Weaver out to hunt lost horses, and to keep an eye out for Crawford! The irony of the situation, her own helplessness, smote the distraught girl. Never before had she entertained thoughts of murder. Now she did. Realizing the fate that lay before her, she wished that Weaver might die, along with this scarred man whose prisoner she was now.

The way wound through shadowed gulches and around the base of jutting promontories. At last, in a rocky pocket at the edge of Cedar Breaks, Eve sighted a bunch of horses. They snorted, lifted their heads at the approach of the two riders.

"Hello, Scar!" bawled a voice from the shadows. "Well, I see you've fetched our little camp cook along. Lucky she's so purty, ain't we?" Bray Weaver appeared.

"We'd better get goin', Bray," said Crawford. "By daylight we can have a hell of a start on Strawn, if he does pick up our trail."

"Yeah, but I'll tie this girl's hands first," said Weaver. "You go over and finish packin' our horse, Scar. You'll find a quart bottle stuffed in the bedroll. A quart I swiped from Strawn!"

"Good for you, pard!" said Crawford. Then, sarcastically, "Now don't treat the little girl too rough."

"I won't." Weaver laughed. Suddenly he reached up, caught the girl and jerked her down from the saddle.

"Keep your dirty hands off me!" With all her strength, with greater fury and desperation that she had ever before experienced, the girl clawed and fought at this big man who held her.

"Fight!" he mocked, twisting her arm until it felt like it would break. "I'll tame you, make you wish you'd treated me better when I give you the chance."

"I wish Ken had killed you!" she choked. "I wish—"

Her words were cut short by a wild yell over by the camp in the pocket. Eve caught the flash of gunfire sparking through the cedars over there, heard the roar of guns filling the pocket with echoes.

"Now what the hell?" Still clinging to the girl with his left hand, Bray Weaver reached for his gun with his right.

"If you're lookin' for a target, here's one!"

Coldly that voice penetrated the night. It was the voice of Ken Cantrell; and, to Eve, it was the herald of salvation.

"Ken!" she screamed, twisting hard to escape Weaver's hold on her. But her cry name was drowned in the ensuing blast of gunfire. That quick, terrified shot of Weaver's had gone wild. He tried to whisk the girl in front of him for a shield, but there was a moment when Eve, understanding her captor's tactics, fought more fiercely than ever. And long enough that Ken was free to shoot, and without hitting her.

Twice his forty-five spouted its flame, and the terrified girl could hear bullets thudding to their mark—Bray Weaver's thick chest. The hand on the girl's arm suddenly loosened its grasp. Big Weaver was sagging to the earth, tumbling face downward.

"Ken!" moaned the girl to the tall man standing there in the moonlight before her. "Oh, Ken!"

He paid no attention to her now. Turning, he ran toward a horseman who, leaning low over his saddle, was driving hard spurs to his horse. Moonlight revealed that rider as Scar Crawford. He saw Ken coming at him now. His gun glinted upward. But before it could explode a cartridge, Ken was shooting; was pouring a hail of lead into Crawford that blasted the killer from his saddle, that sent him tumbling down under the hoofs of his lunging horse.

Eve shuddered as she heard a weak

voice call: "Hey, Ken! I—I'm over here. Kinda bad hit—by Crawford!"

Ken was running toward the man who had called. Then Eve was running in the same direction. She reached the tiny clump of cedars near which lay the form of Otto Strawn, and saw that Ken was bending over the man torn by Scar Crawford's bullets.

"He was too fast," Strawn was groaning through gritted teeth. "I'm damned glad you got him, feller."

"You bad hit, Otto?" Ken asked quietly.

"Bad, yeah. Huh! A little while ago we stood together and watched your old dad die, feller. But, 'fore he died, he asked you to turn the Spear H outfit over to me. He played fair—at the last. So did you, or you'd've fought against doin' what your dad wanted. Well, I think I'd be playin' fair if I turned the Spear H back to—you."

OOFBEATS came drumming toward the pocket. The two riders were Shorty Barth and Slim Dunaway, Spear H punchers. They fell from their saddles, ran toward their wounded boss.

"Aw, hell!" Eve heard Shorty moan. "Them horse thievin' skunks got you, Otto!"

"Yeah, and Ken got them." Strawn forced a grin to his hard face. "That's why I'm askin' you to witness that I'm givin' the Spear H back to Ken Cantrell, gents. I'd never have had it in the first place if Ken here had wanted to law about it. But he turned it over to me. Then, tonight, he risked his own life tryin' to save mine. He's white, that lad. White plumb through. . . ." That weakening voice trailed off into unintelligible babble. Breath fluttered from Strawn's lungs. Soon he lay still, never to move again.

Slowly Ken released the head he had pillowed in his lap. There followed a long pause. It was Shorty Barth who broke the silence. He said:

"Well, Ken, I guess you done about all for Otto Strawn that it was possible to do. And I'm glad he's turned the Spear H back to you."

"So am I," said Slim Dunaway soberly. "There's some things Strawn said that I don't quite savvy. Things, I figger, that was strictly between him and you, Ken. But that's all right, ain't it, Shorty? We heard what Strawn said about the Spear H. It goes to Ken!"

"Right!" Shorty nodded. "And Eve Robertson heard them words, too."

"Yes," said the girl, dabbing at her eyes. "I'm sorry I haven't something of real value to give Ken Cantrell for saving me tonight."

He turned, looked at her. "Once you offered me something I still value more than all the cow outfits in the world, Eve. Your heart. But I can't take it, even if you'd give it now. Not after the way I acted, maybe the way I had to act."

"Better take the girl away, Ken," said Slim Dunaway gently. "Shorty and me'll have to get Otto Strawn ready for his last ride."

Ken took the girl's arm, led her back across the grassy pocket toward her waiting horse. On the way Eve told him how she had happened to be here, how Weaver had tricked her.

"We were on his trail tonight," Ken said. "He thought I wouldn't miss my sorrel till tomorrow mornin', but I did. You see, I decided tonight that I'd leave this range forever. A range that I'd come back to because of—well, of you."

"You do love me, Ken?"

"I always will."

"Then tell me, why did your father deed the Spear H outfit over to Otto Strawn? Tell me straight, Ken. Oh, I know now that you didn't sell it, didn't squander a small fortune over poker tables. Bray started that talk. Tell me!" She caught his arms, made him face her.

"It ain't easy," he said. "But when I'm through, you'll *want* to say goodby, Eve. You're a Robertson, and the Robertsons don't have any use for the kind of folks the—the Cantrells are. You see, Dad never really owned the Spear H. He stole the money that bought the ranch, stole the cattle that stocked that ranch. Stole it years ago from Otto Strawn."

A blow hard had fallen against Eve's heart. Yet, valiantly, she said, "Go on, Ken."

"Well," his voice was low, "when Dad knew he was going to die, he wrote a letter to Strawn, told him where he was, offered to make amends. But Dad didn't know whether Strawn would ever get that letter. It had all happened so long ago. If Strawn hadn't got that letter, hadn't showed up with it—on the day Dad died, I might not have known just what my father was. I'd have kept the outfit that was already deeded to me. It was a hard blow, that day. One that I thought had knocked my sun outa the sky, and forever. My dad a thief, his whole life a lie."

Eve nodded silently and Ken went on, "That's why I walked out on you that day. All I took with me was a heart of lead—and Strawn's promise that he wouldn't expose Dad's past. Strawn kept that promise. He played mighty fair, especially considerin' how many long years he had hated Dad. Mighty fair."

Crying softly, Eve said, "He surely did. But I think he must have learned to like you as much as he must have hated your father during all those years. Otherwise he wouldn't have willed the Spear H to you."

Ken hesitated. Then, bitterly, he said, "What good are grass and water holes and cattle when the girl I love knows what you know about the Cantrell tribe? Still, before we say goodby, I'm askin' a promise of you. Whatever Dad was, he learned an awful lesson. A lesson, I know, that he tried to pass along to a fourteen-year-old kid named Davey Robertson. Promise me you'll never tell Davey what my father was, Eve. That kid had all the faith in the world in Dad. He worshipped him. And if he was to find out—well, you know how youngsters are."

"He'll never know, Ken! The good things George Cantrell taught Davey will stay with that lad forever, make a better man of him. And now, take me in your arms, Ken fellow. And hold me —tight!"

"You mean—" His voice was husky. A strong man who had defied death tonight, and without a tremor, was trembling slightly now.

"I mean that our love is stronger than any blight that could fall on a family name. Besides, I'm not marrying your father, Ken. I'm marrying you, if you still want it that way. And if in the years ahead somebody comes along, somebody that knew your father for what he was once, I'll tell him that George Cantrell gave the world a mighty fine son. I've learned a lesson, too, just like Davey did. A lesson in love—to never stop believing, to always know my heart's choice can't be wrong."

Moist hazel eyes looked long and searchingly into misty blue eyes then. Suddenly Ken Cantrell stepped forward, moved from out of that sinister shadow which an outlaw father's name had threatened to cast upon the destiny of a son. Eager arms encircled Eve Robertson, and there was a breathless moment when the girl knew the rapture of a lover's kiss.

For a long time the embracing couple stood close together there in the soft benediction of moonlight. They didn't see the two Spear H punchers, witnesses to Otto Strawn's verbal will, starting a bunch of stolen horses back toward home range.

These two, who shared the secret of a name Eve would soon take, saw nothing but adoration and understanding in each other's eyes; and perhaps marveled at the miracle of this night.

From Now On

By Art Lawson

All the pleasures of girlhood were denied Julie because she was in hiding with her dad. Even when the man she loved came along, she couldn't admit her real name!

JULIE BRYAN waited until the door closed on the straight back of the stranger, until the song of his spurs on the boardwalk could no longer be heard. Then, resting her hip against the edge of the long counter, she turned her head toward the rear of the store to say softly:

"You can come out, now, Uncle George. He's gone! And, besides, he's not your sheriff!"

Her father pushed aside the curtain that cut off the big main room from the storehouse. He did not come out immediately, but stood there, blinking his pale eyes in the dark comfort at the rear of his store. Here he felt safe. Even when the acetylene lamps were lighted there were always shadows back here behind the piles of levis and shirts and the screen of sheep-lined coats hanging from a pipe that reached clear across the store.

"You sure, Julie?" he asked. "Positively sure?"

"I couldn't be surer, Uncle George!" Julie sighed. At first she had had a lot of trouble trying to remember to call her father "Uncle." But now it came as

natural as eating, as simple as calling herself "Julie Burns" instead of Julia Bryan, her real name. "This cowboy is young enough to be your sheriff's son," she assured him. "Besides, he's handsome! And the way you describe this gent who's hunting you he must look like a cross between a jackass and a Brahma bull."

"He's a cross between a polecat and a coyote," her father growled. "But he don't look it. He looks just like anybody else my size, only heftier. He's bald as a buzzard and has eyes like a hawk."

"And a scar that looks like a tiny cross on his left cheek," Julie prompted. "He's lower than a snake and meaner than a hog, and he ain't never going to catch us!" She somehow found a perverse delight in mocking her father this gloomy afternoon, but suddenly she began to cry. If she could only really let the tears roll down her cheeks, if she could only give in to this, then maybe she would feel better afterwards. But the sobs were tight, hard knots in her throat, and her eyes were almost dry.

It had been a long time since Julie had cried and it now left her father hopelessly puzzled. In the darkness behind the screen of coats he moved uneasily.

"Stumpy Anders may be craftier than a fox," Julie's father tried to comfort her, "but he'll never think of looking here for us. Gents who are runnin' away from the hang rope hide in the hills; they don't open up a store on a crossroads. I thought it all out before I come here. With this beard of mine, I ain't likely to be recognized even by my friends. So we ain't got nothing to worry about!"

Julie straightened up, managed to control the sobs.

"Then why do you always go and hide when a stranger shows up?"

"I just want to check on them before they check on me," he explained with little conviction. "I just don't want to face Stumpy Anders. He can see through a three-foot adobe wall."

Julie had heard this all so many times in the past, how her father had lost his ranch to an unscrupulous railroad when she was hardly more than a button, how her mother had died on the long trek in search of a new location, how her father, embittered and broken by it all had joined with three other men to wreck a train and rob the express car.

That one and only exploit of theirs outside the law had been a dismal failure. His two companions had been hunted down and shot by Stumpy Anders, then a railroad detective, now a sheriff down in Texas. One of these two men had had the loot, though Anders claimed never to have recovered it. And Anders had sworn to devote his life to hunting down Joe Bryan—the man Julie now called "Uncle George." There had been years of wandering after that, of constant running away, until Julie's father conceived this scheme of hiding in plain view, of operating the store up here at Salt Creek Ford in Montana.

At first Julie had welcomed the plan—anything to end the interminable wanderings! But after three years of it Julie knew it was just the same thing called by a different name. Her father rabbited for the back room the moment a stranger hove into view, and more and more she found herself being cut off from the kind of life that should be the lot of every girl her age.

That was why she had cried tonight. The appearance of the affable young stranger had somehow summed it all up for her, and when he had left and her father had come from hiding, she could not stand it any longer. This store and all that it stood for had become a nightmare to her.

"Uncle George," Julie slipped from the counter where she had been half sitting. "It's getting on to nightfall. I guess I better cook up supper."

Julie ate first, then set the table for her father so that he could eat while she watched the store. It was Saturday night, and business would be brisk later on for the cowboys had ridden in from the neighboring ranches, and the cattlemen had come to town with their wives to stock up for the following week or

to buy a new dress or pair of levis. But at this early hour there was little trade except in the packed restaurant and the three saloons where a special Saturday night supper was being served. The respite would give Julie a chance to ready things for the evening's rush.

She was straightening up the front of the store, after having lighted the two big lamps, when the stranger came in. In the brighter light he seemed even handsomer than he had been that afternoon, and so friendly that Julie found herself smiling at him.

"Forget something, Mister?"

He grinned. It was good to see a man smile, especially a man who was not running away from his past.

"I wouldn't say I forgot something!" He eased his long body down onto a soap box, looked over her approvingly as she stood in the circle of light, slim and lovely and blond. "But I just learned something, and I wondered if you could help me out."

Her blue eyes narrowed. But his smile was as friendly as ever.

"Maybe so, Mister. Maybe I could," she tried to sound casual.

"I just found out," he said slowly, "that there is going to be a dance in town tonight." Her relief, she was afraid, was too apparent. "And I was wondering," he went on, "if you knew where I could get me a gal to take to this *baile*."

"There aren't any girls in this town," she told him, "only Daisy Jones whose old man runs the Red Dog Bar. And I guess she has forty cowboys squiring her already."

"There is another gal," the stranger said, "who I met this afternoon. But I guess she has fifty cowboys carrying her to that dance. Or maybe it's eighty. Anyhow, she's twice as good looking as this Daisy Jones."

"If she's twice as good looking as Daisy Jones, she must be a stranger in these parts. And if she's a stranger, you've got as good a chance as anybody else. Why didn't you ask her when you saw her this afternoon?" Julie laughed.

"I meant to!" He took a deep breath. "But I kinda got sidetracked. Maybe I better ask her now." He stood up, took off his hat, and made a little bow. "May I have the honor of taking you to the dance tonight, *Señorita?*"

"Me?" Julie pretended delighted surprise.

"Sure!" He smiled triumphantly. "Or are there eighty cowboys already ahead of me?"

Now, Julie had never been approached in quite this manner, and it flustered her. Instead of being cool and concise, she blurted out:

"There aren't any cowboys ahead of you, stranger. I don't go to dances. I have to stick to my job here. Saturday is our big night!"

"It's going to be!" he said.

"What's going to be what?"

"Saturday is going to be our big night. I'll pick you up at closin' time. When's that?"

"We never close as long as we have some business!"

"I'll pick you up then!" He walked over to the door, leaving her still standing where she had been when he came in. Just before stepping out, he said: "The name's John Smith. And your name's Julie Bryan. Daisy Jones told me all about you."

That got up Julie's ire. "She did, did she?"

"Sure!" The cowboy smiled easily. "She said you were a mouse. And she bet me ten dollars I couldn't get you to come to the dance."

Julie stamped her foot. But the stranger was already closing the door behind him.

FURIOUSLY waiting on the cowmen and their wives, selling them flour and beans, canned goods and long red underwear, Julie kept busy. She deliberately refrained from telling her father that the stranger had come back and invited her to the dance because she knew he would flatly refuse to let her go. She had danced

often in some of the owlhoot hangouts where they had lived the first few years of their running away. But when they settled in Salt Creek Ford her father had told her that he didn't want her to "have any truck" with the cowboys. Sooner or later, he claimed, she would let a word drop that would give them away.

At first she had not minded so much, for she was only sixteen then. But lately loneliness had crept up on her, and nights when she could hear the fiddle down the street she felt as if something inside her would burst. So she did not tell him, she would just go, she decided, and let him bawl her out for it later.

About ten o'clock the fiddles and the tin-can piano struck it up on the second floor of Drovers Hall, the only two-story building in Salt Creek Ford. About eleven, the stranger who called himself John Smith, wandered into the store.

Julie was demonstrating one of "these new-fangled mantle lamps" to the thin little wife of a ranch owner while "Uncle George" was helping the husband make up his mind whether he would take a bright red plaid shirt that "would set even an ox to pawin'," or a more conservative one "more in keepin' with the old lady's mind!"

John Smith looked around, counted up a half-dozen customers who were still waiting their turn, then left. It was half an hour later that a sudden flurry of shots broke out down by the creek, to be followed by a scream as of a man in mortal agony. Then, in the silence that fell thick over the settlement, everyone in town heard a man's voice:

"No! Don't!"

And a second later, a sharp splash as some heavy object fell into the swirling water!

Julie cut off short the middle of a sales talk on the virtues of the new Colt double-action revolver. Her father suddenly remembered something that had to be looked at in the back room. The customer Julie had been talking to froze for a moment, then, with everyone in the store, plunged for the door. Outside people were streaming for the creek, and Julie, swept away with the excitement, ran out to watch.

There was a knot of citizens down by the creek, holding lanterns, one with a blazing torch, and the crowd was growing every second. As she watched, a smaller knot broke away, started downstream.

The voice at her shoulder startled her.

"Closin' up, Miss Julie? I see there ain't any more customers!"

She swung to face the stranger who called himself John Smith. He was grinning easily, and it made her feel strangely angry that he should look so pleased after what appeared to be a brutal killing; and her anger, he thought, made her even more beautiful than he had believed.

"We better be gettin' along to that dance," he suggested.

Julie stamped her foot exasperatedly. "I don't know how you can talk that way right after a murder!"

"It's only *one* murder, ain't it?" he asked. "Nothin' to get excited about. Why, where I come from—"

"I suppose there's a killing every night," she cut in, "and two on Saturday!"

"Three!" he said briefly. "Look! The fiddlers are coming back!"

The two brass carriage lanterns that hung on each side of the swinging doors to the Red Dog Bar, shone briefly on two oldsters carrying violins. There was a third man, younger and dissipated-looking, walking with them.

"And they got the professor with them," John Smith said. "Come on!"

Julie held back. "I got to stay here. The customers—"

"They won't be back for a spell. We can have one dance, anyway, Julie!"

It was too much to resist. And just the way she was, without bothering even to fancy up for her first party in Salt Creek Ford, Julie let him take her hand and lead her down to the Drovers Hall.

LATER, as she lay on her lonely bed, looking at the rough pine ceiling, three scenes stood out as if she were

living them over again. One was of her father and herself, for she had stayed until almost dawn, until the last song of the fiddles. He had bawled her out, he had given her plenty! But she had not even minded when he said: "For all you know maybe this good-looking cowboy was sent up here by Stumpy Anders, and first thing you know you'll be fallin' in love with him. Daughter—"

She had broken in then, successfully quieting him with only three words:

"Niece, Uncle George!"

The second scene was in Drovers Hall. They were dancing to "Little Brown Jug," and when Old Man Wiggins called: "Then swing your honey and half promenade!" John Smith had lifted her clear off her feet. It was wonderful, that second, breath-takingly glorious, while she was held tight against his chest, his powerful arm over her back. It was the high spot of a night that would follow her to her old maid's grave. It was the moment when she knew that she would never meet another man like this one.

"You're lovely," John had said.

And half of what her father had said was truer than he could have dreamed—"First thing you know you'll be fallin' in love with him!"

The third scene was during intermission while she was sitting with John Smith listening to the wild tales he told of drifting around the West. Daisy Jones, all fancied up to outshine the girls who had ridden in from the ranches for the evening, had become a little piqued at this competition from the only other town girl. She had come over during the intermission, ostensibly to talk to Julie, actually to be near the handsome stranger. Julie could not remember any of her chatter except:

"And down the creek they found some exploded fire-crackers. Father says there wasn't a murder at all. It's just some crazy cowpuncher having fun!"

At that moment Julie's eyes met John's. There was hidden laughter there, and she turned away. As she did so, her eyes caught a smudge of red creek mud on John Smith's boot.

THE week passed, and John Smith found an amazing number of things to buy in "The Salt Creek General Mercantile Emporium." He bought fish hooks, matches, tobacco, a new shirt. He even looked over their assortment of traps and shotguns, and then bought the prettiest dress in the store. He acted perfectly crazy, Julie thought, especially the way he came in three times a day to buy canned goods, tomatoes and corned beef, being his favorites, and insisted on eating them there with a spoon he bought because he said he could not stand the cooking down at the Elite.

He spent most of his time in the store, so much so that some of the settlement's more humorous citizens started asking him if he worked there. But sometimes he went fishing in the creek, or sat out on the board walk under the store's awning whittling wooden chains out of a pine stick.

It was Friday night, and business was slack, when he bought that blue dress, and Julie could not hold herself in any longer. It seemed to her that she had known this cowboy all her life, and that since there was no one else to take care of him, she had better step in.

"Now I don't know what you want that dress for!" she opened up on him. "I sometimes think you must of gotten bucked off by that Tanglefoot horse of yours and landed on your head."

"I did!" he agreed. "And then Tanglefoot stepped on me. I ain't been the same since. In fact, it must of been the day I rode in here. Ever since then I've felt like I'd been kicked right between the eyes and wouldn't never get over it."

"Well, you better," she said spiritedly. "If you ever expect to set up that horse ranch you been talking about starting in these parts, you better wake up enough to look up some land instead of hanging around here all the time—and buying blue dresses!"

"You said it was the prettiest dress you'd ever seen, didn't you?"

"Sure, but I don't see what you're going to do with it."

His smile became a frown then, and he leaned over her to whisper into her ear:

"Now, don't you tell anybody. It's for my bride!"

"Bride!"

Of course Julie had it all figured out that she could never marry this cowboy, or anybody else, for that matter. But she had caught herself singing lately, something she had not done for years, and she had laughed at her father's fears, and tickled the old man under the chin when he'd said:

"Damned if I can see what you're so happy about! Wimmen! Bah!"

"Sure," John Smith was saying, "why not? A gent's got to have a bride, don't he, if he is goin' to set up housekeepin'? Well, I'm waitin' for mine. And she and me will pick out this spread together."

"I hope she likes that blue dress!" Julie said. There was no use in even letting him know she realized he meant her, because she could never marry him. She couldn't even tell him her real name!

Her father who was usually too busy looking out for Stumpy Anders to notice anything wrong with her, did see that she was quiet and unhappy that night.

"It's that John Smith again," he growled. "What's he been doing to you, daughter?"

She could not hold back the tears any longer. She was alone with her father in the back room, and she threw her arms around his neck and just let herself sob on his shoulder.

"It's not him, Pop! It's this life we lead. This running away. This fear. Calling you Uncle George and not being natural. Can't we go away, far away? To the East. Or to Australia?"

Her father patted her gently on her back, and after a while she stopped crying.

"Maybe Canada," he said. "We could sell the store and go to Canada. Or maybe we could go to Alaska. I hear they've found gold up there. . . ."

THEY hung a "For Sale" sign on the door next morning and, in answer to the townpeople's questioning, Julie told how they had planned for years to go back East to her Uncle's home town, and now he felt that he had enough money to retire on, to buy a little farm where he had been a boy. It was a good answer, and it satisfied everyone's curiosity.

John Smith took no notice, however, of the sign, and came into the store for his canned breakfast, lunch and supper. He talked to Julie in his easy way of casual things until she thought she would have to tell him to leave before she ran away herself to hide. All through the slow morning she was haunted by the fact that she was an outlaw because she protected one and could never be honest with him.

And in the afternoon she welcomed the rush of business that kept her so busy she had little time for her gloomy thoughts. As there was no dance in town this Saturday night, business slacked off early, the ranchers driving home in their buckboards for supper.

By eight o'clock the store was deserted. It was then that she noticed John Smith sitting out in front of the store whittling one of his endless wooden chains, and realized suddenly that he had been there ever since five o'clock. He had not moved except to come into the store at about six for another can of tomatoes, a can of corned beef, and some peaches for desert.

She watched him for a while as he whittled. A customer came for a pair of levis, bought them and left. She tried not to look, but her blue eyes turned irresistibly toward the boardwalk. John Smith was still there.

Indignantly she stalked over to the door. Standing there in the bright square of light from the acetylene lamps, she said:

"I suppose this is the only place where you can sit and whittle."

"No!" He shook his head. "Not the only place, but I like it best. There's plenty of light and a nice friendly at-

mosphere. Down at the hotel there are too many drummers."

He continued whittling while she stood silently in the doorway. After a while she sat down on the threshold, watching him. Finally he said:

"Find anybody to buy the store yet?"

"Not so far."

Deftly he freed the last link in his chain from the solid block from which he had carved it. He now had seven links with a ball at one end. The other end of the chain was still attached to the original bit of wood by a half-link. He started turning this piece into a hook, working carefully on it, so carefully that Julie was not sure he had spoken when he said:

"Was your father's name Joe Bryan before he became Uncle George?"

Julie gasped, startled and frightened.

"You don't have to tell me," John Smith said softly, not looking up. "But maybe you better tell Uncle George that my name is really John Smith and that I'm Jake Smith's son. And tell him that I'm up here looking for that loot. Maybe he never told you about it, but if he is Joe Bryan he probably knows what happened to that dinero. The loot wasn't on my old man or on Charlie Condit when Stumpy Anders shot them both in the back."

Julie felt so cold the fires of hell would not have warmed her. Here was something neither she nor her father had figured on, and it seemed so awful that it should come just when they were ready to find a new life. She tried to sound casual.

"Uncle George will probably be just as puzzled by what you're saying as I am!"

"Tell him, anyway!" John Smith said.

She sat there silently, and possibly she would not have moved all night if another customer had not come for a late purchase. It was escape, waiting on him, and she jumped at it eagerly, and it was after he had left that she noticed her father lurking in the darkness behind the sheep-lined coats. Very quietly, and without looking at him, she said:

"That stranger is Jake Smith's son!"

"It's a trick! He's really one of Stumpy Anders' men!"

In panic, her father slunk into the storeroom. A moment later, he was back, the glint of light on the shotgun like a diamond in the darkness, and she knew what he intended doing. But she could not let him do it! She couldn't! For she loved this man whose father was an outlaw like her own. She could not let a thing like this happen.

It took her only a second to reach that piled-up table of long-handled underwear and shirts and levis. Before her father had discovered what she was up to she had the muzzle of the gun clenched tightly in her two fists, and he could not have pulled the trigger without blowing her to bits.

"Pop! Please! You go away. I'll stay and sell the store. I'll send you the money. But don't get into a fight with him. One of you would be killed—and I'd die. You can get out the back way, Pop! See! He's not even looking. He doesn't know I told you. He's still whittling!"

The old man was crazy, wild from a fear that had haunted him so many years. He wrenched at the gun, fought silently, bitterly for its possession. But she clung to it with all her lithe strength, and she was still hanging on to it when John Smith finished his whittling and stood up and walked into the store.

"You two," he said, "had better quit scrapping. Stumpy Anders is comin' down the road with a couple of friends. It looks like we were going to have some excitement."

JULIE BRYAN, who had been so cold a moment before, was seething. She was girl enough to be all mixed up in her emotions, but she was woman enough to know that she had been bitterly fooled. This cowboy, and she could not help loving him, had double-crossed her.

And now his henchmen were closing in on them.

John Smith was talking calmly: "I been watching him all night. He come in about six o'clock and has been drinking down at the Red Dog Bar. He'll be here in a second, and if I was you, Julie, I'd take your old man's shotgun and hide behind that pile of pants. Your pop and me are going to have some words with these gents!"

"If you were me," Julie said, "you'd take that shotgun and let both barrels go right into your gizzard."

"O.K.," John Smith answered. "Then shoot me in the gizzard. But give me a chance to talk to these gents first." With that he turned his back on Julie and began looking over an assortment of socks on a table in the middle of the room. "Come on, Uncle George," he said to the table. "Come on over here and sell me a pair of these socks. Here they come!"

Three men hove into view outside the big window. One of them halted. The other two stepped through the doorway, blinded momentarily by the bright light. Some steel had come to Julie's father's backbone and he had dropped the gun, gone into the main part of the store to sell the socks to John Smith. John was saying that he did not think they were all wool, and the storekeeper was giving him a convincing argument, when the two men walked up to him and tapped him on the shoulder. He glanced up, pretended not to recognize them, said with an effort:

"Pardon me, gentlemen. In a moment. This here cowpuncher is first!"

Julie, hiding in the shadows, could plainly see the face of the heavier of the two men. His eyes were sharper than a bowie knife. No hair showed beneath his Stetson, and there was a tiny, cross-shaped scar on his left cheek. It seemed to her that she knew this man, she had heard of him so often.

"Tha's all right," Stumpy Anders said. "Just finish waiting on him. Then we're takin' you back to Texas!"

The storekeeper had begun trembling violently. John Smith dropped his socks, looked up in pretended surprise.

"Huh?"

"You just keep out of this, cowboy," Stumpy Anders said. "This old goat held up a train down Texas way, ten years ago. He's wanted bad. Double-crossed his partners and ran off with the loot. The law got them, and now it's got him! Guess you didn't know you had a snake in the grass in your own home town, huh, cowboy?"

Julie's fingers quivered over the double triggers on the shotgun. The muzzle had shifted from John Smith's back and was now drawing a bead on Anders' belly. It had been an entirely unconscious act on Julie's part.

Her father was too scared now to speak. But John Smith began grinning.

"You don't mean he's Joe Bryan?"

"Sure! You heard tell of him?"

"Of course! Me, I'm John Smith!"

"Well, I'm Pocohantas!" Anders laughed uproariously at his joke, and his side-kick joined in half-heartedly.

"I said," John Smith was talking in clipped words now, "that I'm John Smith. I'm Jake Smith's son. And you are Stumpy Anders!"

The man's face blanched. "You got no argument with me, kid. Your old man got what was coming to him."

"In the back!"

"He was running, and wouldn't stop!"

"He was running with a mail bag over his shoulder and tripped up. That's when you shot him, when he was lying on the ground. I didn't see it happen. But I buried my old man, and I saw the direction the bullet went into him. And I knew he had that mail bag because I was up in the loft when he and Joe and Charlie Condit came to the barn for fresh horses. Joe had gotten scared and was running out on them. I heard them arguing about it."

The ex-detective's scar shone white on his heavy face. Both he and his partner were ready for their guns.

"Kid," he said, "this old goat, here, was just putting on a show. He snuck around afterwards and got them to give him the mail bags full of dough. Then he run out. I oughta know. I was on the

grounds when the two were caught." He cleared his throat. "That loot ain't ever been recovered."

"Until tonight!"

"What's that?"

"Until tonight," John Smith repeated quietly. "I've been hunting for that loot for ten years. I didn't like what my old man done and I wanted to sort of square up things. But I didn't find that stolen stuff until tonight. After meeting up with Uncle George, here, I figgered he didn't have the nerve to come back after he told Pop and Charlie he was beating it. Hell, he's been runnin' ever since! He was just gettin' ready to run again when I sent you that telegram!"

"You?" Anders roared.

"Sure!" John said easily. "Me! I figgered if Joe Bryan didn't have the dough, Pop must of still had those stolen goods on him when he was shot. He didn't have time enough to hide it. So I figgered some more while I was whittlin' this here wooden chain out and things started fitting together, link-like. The gent who did have those government bonds never cashed them. Maybe he spent the cash. Nobody knows. But there is a big reward on those bonds, and if the gent who has them wants to cash them he'll have to do some tall thinking or catch Joe Bryan first and claim he took them off Joe. That's how I figgered it out. So I sent you the telegram, Anders. And damned if you didn't come and bring them bonds in your saddle bags!"

Julie saw Anders' hands streaking for his guns before John Smith could possibly have caught the movement. She screamed from sheer excitement, and her finger cramped down hard on both triggers of that old shotgun. The recoil of it knocked her off her feet, back into the shadows behind the dry-goods. She screamed again and scrambled to her hands and knees and crawled under the long table that was piled with levis and shirts and long-handled red underwear.

She reached the sock counter as her father tackled beefy Stumpy Anders, as Stumpy's right-hand man howled, dropped his gun and was flung back against the canned goods. Now, she saw, John Smith's six-shooter was in action driving back the third confederate at the door, and she joined her father in tumbling Stumpy Anders back against the flour barrels by the side counter. But he was too tough for the both of them, and his Colt was leveling, coming down until it would have John Smith in the sights.

She tried desperately, vainly, to reach that gun, to deflect its aim. But Stumpy Anders flung her aside as if she were only a child, sent her flying back until a stack of farm tools brought her up short with a furious clatter. Trying to maintain her balance, her hand closed over the shaft of a shovel. She lifted it—swung it with all her might.

And the crunch of the blade on Stumpy Anders' head was not a pleasant sound. . . .

THE FOLLOWING days were busy ones for Julie Bryan. She had to help arrange to send Stumpy Anders, his head well bandaged, back to Texas under guard. The recovered bonds had to be returned. And her father, who could be Joe Bryan again after ten years of being Uncle George Burns, had to square himself with the law. John Smith fixed up most of this, refusing the award because he felt he would not be "squared up for what my old man done," if he took pay for his efforts. He even fixed it so that Julie's father would be pardoned for the train robbery because of the part he had taken in capturing Stumpy Anders and getting back the twice-stolen loot.

But Julie was not happy. John had said nothing more about a blue dress for a certain girl. Maybe he never would, maybe. . . .

"Heck, kid," John Smith said to her one night as he whittled by the acetylene light and she sat on the store's

threshold watching him. "Ain't you ever going to take down that For Sale sign?"

"Nope! We're going to sell this store when Pop comes back, and go to Alaska." She made a brave effort to sound casual. Maybe he'd just been playing with her affections until he'd accomplished his purpose with Anders.

He stopped whittling, set down his knife and wood, and stared at her. "I thought you and me—I mean—"

She could not help it, and she blurted out: "You thought! Thought what?"

"You sure take a lot of telling, darling. Maybe I did say it in a kind of roundabout way but here goes. Ain't you goin' to wear that blue dress tomorrow, when we get married?"

"Oh, Johnny!"

She was in his arms now, and his kisses were warm on her lips, and her heart was beating with a new surge of life.

After a while she said, "Oh, Johnny! I can't believe it. We're in heaven! Really we must be in heaven!"

He drew her to him so tightly it was long moments before she could get her breath again.

"But if this is heaven, Julie," he finally said, "where we going to be from now on?"

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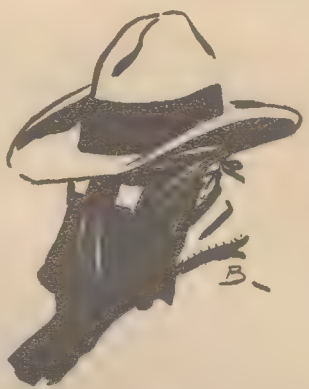

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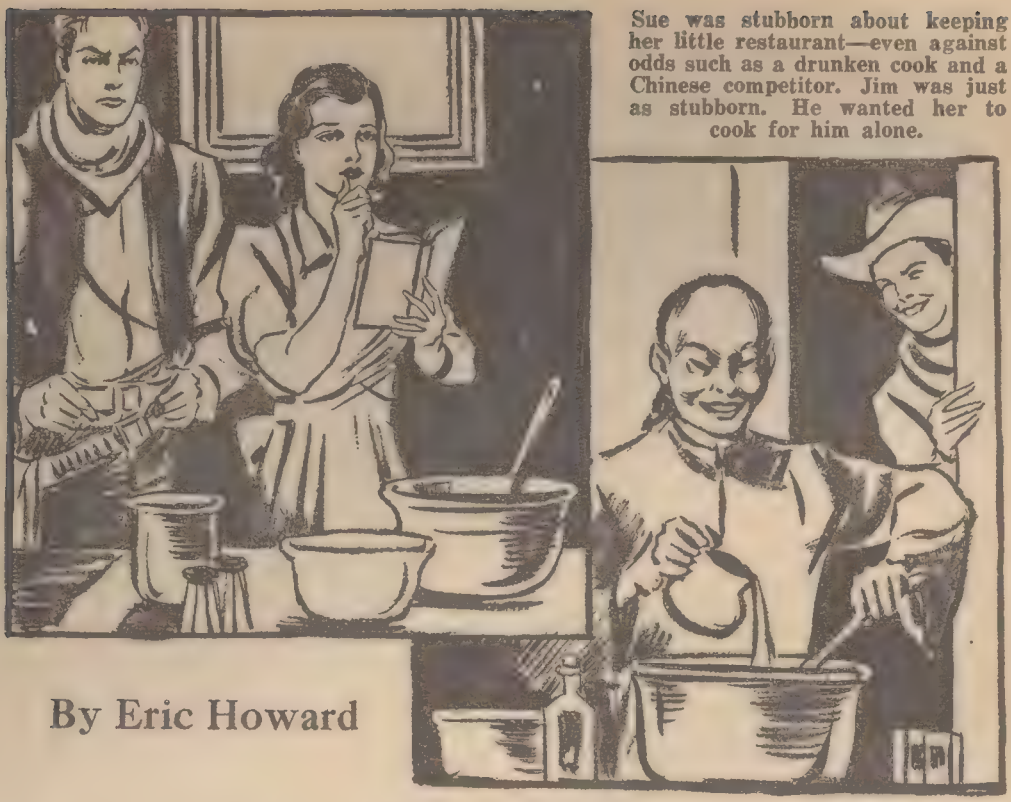
BLACK MASK



Sue was stubborn about keeping her little restaurant—even against odds such as a drunken cook and a Chinese competitor. Jim was just as stubborn. He wanted her to cook for him alone.

By Eric Howard

Battle of the Beaneries

JIM FAIRFAX watched the crowd of hungry men making their way to the Chinaman's. Only a few old-timers were heading toward Aunt Belle's eating place; and that was only because of their loyalty to Aunt Belle, who wasn't there any more.

Sheriff Hi Wayne, a five-foot-six man with bowed legs and a handlebar mustache, came out of his office, paused beside Jim and spat.

"She won't make it, son," he drawled. "Susie ain't the cook her Aunt Belle is and she can't work twenty-four hours a day like the Chinaman. Since he started up, she ain't got a chance. He sure throws a lot of chuck on the table. You ought to talk her into quittin'."

"Quittin'?" said Jim. "Did you ever know a Richards that would quit? Not that I ain't tried. But how can she quit? She promised her Aunt Belle she'd run the beanery and keep it goin' while Belle is away recuperatin'. Where you goin' to eat?"

The sheriff laughed. "My heart says at Aunt Belle's, my stomach says at the Chink's. Bein' a sensible man, I foller my stomach. How about you?"

"Me, too," Jim said. "Let's go."

He pulled his hat down. His lips tightened and his chin went out. He and Susie Richards had quarreled; no use going there any more. He could be as stubborn as she was. He strode off and the shorter sheriff had to hustle to keep up with him.

It was amazing how much food the Chinaman could serve for four bits. Pounded steak with gravy, mashed potatoes, string beans, carrots—a big

plateful; all the biscuits a feller could eat. Coffee and pie or pudding; big portions.

Jim remarked about it.

"These Chinks are smart," the sheriff said. "Why, I knowed one once that was cookin' for the old Star outfit. Made a deal with the boss he was to get so much money every month for supplies and no pay. Agreed to feed everybody so there'd be no kick. You know what? That son of a gun saved enough money in two years to go back to China, get him a palace and three wives."

"Honest?"

"Honest!" the sheriff swore. "This feller reminds me of him—looks like he's givin' us forty-nine cents worth of *comida,* at wholesale prices, for four bits. But he's makin' money. They always do. It's a knack."

"Susie was tellin' me how much everything costs. Four-bit meals are sort of standard, but she can't do this for four bits. She said she'd lose a dime on every meal."

"Susie ain't a Chink," the sheriff observed.

"Well, I should say not!" Jim growled. "It still looks funny to me. How he can do so much and she can't, when they have to buy their stuff at the same places?"

"I'll tell you, son," the sheriff said solemnly. "Chinks has got a different kind of arithmetic, a different way of countin'. It's tough on Susie, and Belle will be mad when she comes back and finds her trade gone. But not even Belle could buck this feller."

"Funny how he started up right after Belle left," Jim mused. "Jest makin' it harder for Sue. Awful funny." He looked up as a big man, in an expensive leather jacket, with a white hat on his blond head, came in laughing. "Maybe not so blamed funny, either," he added. "Bart Brownell owns this buildin', don't he?"

"Sure. Leased it to the Chink for a good rent, you can bet. Hello, Bart. How they comin'?"

Bart Brownell beamed. "Howdy, sheriff. Fine! Hi, Fairfax. Puttin' away a good meal for a change, huh?"

"What do you mean?" Jim asked.

"Why, nothin', *amigo,*" Brownell said blandly. "Just thought you'd like Ah Low's cookin' after what you get out your way."

"We eat all right," Jim said.

"Sure glad to hear it," Brownell said. "See you later, sheriff. So long."

He walked to the rear of the restaurant, greeting others, and sat down at a table.

The sheriff leaned forward, rolling a cigarette, apparently giving it all his attention, and spoke in a low tone.

"You young galoot," he said mildly, "why do you have to advertise you don't like Brownell? Whyn't you put on manners, same as him?"

"Some of these days," Jim growled, "I'm goin' to knock that smile of his right through his face."

"That's what I mean—advertisin'," the sheriff drawled. "Tellin' me, the law, of your criminal intent. Whyn't you take a lesson from the Chinese, if not from Brownell? That Chink's face hasn't got any more expression than a rubber ball."

"I'll bet Brownell set him up in business," Jim said, with his hands on the table, as though he felt an impulse to leap on somebody. "That's it! That's why he don't have to make money. And why did he do it? Because—"

The sheriff coughed a warning. Ah Low was right beside the table.

"Ev'lything all light?" he asked. "Mo' pudding, you likee, please?"

The sheriff patted Ah Low's arm. "Everything's fine," he said enthusiastically. "I'm full as a tic. My friend here was just sayin' he ain't had such a feed since the last time he was in."

Ah Low beamed and bowed. The sheriff smiled benignly and kicked Jim under the table. Jim forced a smile.

As they went out, a little later, Jim began to talk again, but the sheriff shut him up with: "I don't want to hear no more criminal intents out of you."

Just then a swaying figure, mumbling and muttering, appeared. He was com-

ing toward them. He was quite drunk, a middle-aged, slight, inconspicious man. When he saw the sheriff, he paused, glared at him, then threw back his head and let out a scornful laugh.

"Old Bowlegs, the law!" he shouted. "All right, Wayne! Fill your hand! We'll shoot it out here and now! I've waited for this day all my life. Fill your hand! I'll let you draw, then I'll drill you right through your ugly black heart. This is my day to howl!".

"If it ain't old Deadwood Dick," the sheriff drawled. "You'll do your howlin' in my jail if you don't shut up. Has it been three months since your last spree or are they comin' more frequent? One more word out of you and I'll knock you sober."

The drunken man howled wildly. A crowd began to gather. He announced that they were old enemies, that he had come to shoot it out, that he was a bad hombre and he was going to kill a miserable, little star-toter.

The sheriff sighed wearily and stepped forward. He made no move toward his gun. The drunken man fell into a crouch, his right arm crooked and stiff, his flabby face distorted in what he imagined was an expression of rage.

"Go for your gun!" he shouted. "I'm goin' to kill you!"

He staggered a little, then his hand moved down, in a fumbling gesture, toward his gun.

Jim shouted, "Hold it!"

The sheriff said over his shoulder: "Stay out of this, all of you! This man's a friend of mine."

He continued to advance. Suddenly, like a human sidewinder, he struck. His leap carried him to the drunken man's side. His left arm, straight across the man's body, was like a bar of steel. It knocked the wind from him and also caused him to lose his hold on his gun. Then he fell backwards.

The little sheriff calmly removed his gun and stood looking down at him.

"Couple of you boys tote him to jail so I can sober him up. The old son of a gun goes on a toot every three months. Then he starts out to kill me, thinks he's plumb bad. Harmless as a kitten."

"You took a chance," Jim said. "He could've shot you."

The sheriff spat. "Any time I can't disarm a drunk, son, I'll turn over this badge to somebody that can. That's whatever."

Having nothing to do, since Sue didn't want him around, Jim trailed along to the sheriff's office with him. He watched the sheriff fuss over his prisoner, making him comfortable, letting him go to sleep.

When they were sitting in the sheriff's office and he had rolled a cigarette, the sheriff said: "Say, Susie could use Dick Parks when he sobers up! He's the best blamed cook that every slung a Dutch oven. And he'll stay sober close to three months, till he busts loose again."

"She can't afford to hire anybody, she told me."

The sheriff winked. "Leave it to me. I'll make out it's charity, make out she's bein' kind to old Dick. Just let him help for enough to eat and a place to sleep out back. And the way he'll feel tomorrow, he'll do whatever I say. Worst of these spells is how repentant he is afterwards. You leave it to me, Jim."

HOWEVER the sheriff put it to Susie, Dick Parks was working at Aunt Belle's the following afternoon. He must have started some time after the noon meal. Shortly before supper, he appeared in front of the establishment, neat and clean in a white apron, and suspended an iron triangle from a rafter. A little later he came out again and struck the triangle resoundingly.

Men poured into the street. They looked for the fire, but there was no fire—just old Dick Parks whanging the triangle at Aunt Belle's.

That evening, trade was about equally divided between the two places. There were plenty of men in town who knew

how well old Dick could cook. The meal he had prepared, which Sue served, was as filling as Ah Low's and tasted much better.

Jim and the sheriff walked in rather late. Jim looked at Sue. She was something to look at in a starched, white uniform. Her cheeks glowed, she was smiling, and her hair seemed to curl more entrancingly and to look more golden than ever. Jim heaved a sigh.

They sat down at a corner table and Sue came right over. She barely glanced at Jim.

"Old Dick is grand, sheriff!" she said enthusiastically. "I'm so glad you sent him to me. He knows just how to cook for a crowd. I get rattled when I have to feed more than six people."

"You're doin' a fine thing, Susie," the sheriff said, "lettin' him work here so's he can pay his fine. Maybe it'll learn him not to drink and try to kill people."

"I can hardly believe it," she said. "He's so kind and gentle."

The sheriff gave his order. Sue turned to Jim. Her glance was impersonal, cool.

"And you, sir?" she asked, just as though she didn't know him, just as though they hadn't been friends for many years.

Well, he shouldn't have talked to her the way he did. Shouldn't have told her she couldn't run Aunt Belle's, that it was too much for her. All he had meant was that he didn't want to see her working so hard, worrying so much. But he might have known she'd take it otherwise. The trouble with Sue was she was stubborn.

"I'll have the same," he said gruffly.

Jim debated with himself whether he should go back to the ranch—he was the superintendent of the big Apex outfit, owned by a cattle company—or whether he should stay in town to see how things turned out.

Sue didn't want him, that was plain; he might as well go home. But he had left his *segundo,* Clay Morley, in charge; and he wasn't really needed there. He might as well stay. There was something funny about the way Ah Low had set up in business just as soon as Aunt Belle left. Something funny about Bart Brownell's doings, too.

Jim was plenty stubborn, himself, and he wanted to look into things. He decided to stay in town.

The trade at Aunt Belle's increased. Ah Low's business fell off. It was hard to say whether Sue was making any profit, but at least she was holding the trade—with Dick Parks' meals—and meeting the Chinaman's competion.

Then, a couple of days later, as the supper crowd entered Aunt Belle's, old Dick came weaving out of the kitchen, a long knife in his hand. Supper was ready, but Dick didn't intend to let anybody eat.

"Get out of here, you coyotes!" he ordered. "Or I'll carve you into steak."

The old cook, staggering, reached for a Dutch oven full of chili con carne and hurled it at a man who had laughed at him. The man retreated outside, calling the sheriff. Others stayed, urging Dick to drop his knife. His threats became wilder.

The sheriff appeared. Jim saw the crowd and ran down. The sheriff walked in and looked at Dick.

"Whew!" he said. "I gave strict orders nobody was to sell or give him a drop. He didn't have any money. Where'd you get it, Deadwood?"

Dick didn't answer. He glared at the sheriff, his enemy; he accused him of terrible deeds; he threatened him with torture and death.

"One o' these days," the sheriff said, "I'm goin' to get plumb mad at you. Drop that knife!"

"I'll drop it in your measly heart! You been persecutin' me!"

"I'll take it away from him," Jim offered, pushing forward.

"No!" the sheriff said. "My job."

He stepped forward, didn't touch his gun. Dick bared his teeth. The sheriff kept on going. Dick raised the knife to strike. Jim edged forward to help.

But the wiry little sheriff didn't need help. Looking Dick in the eye, he seized a plate from the counter, hurled it at his head. The cook ducked and lunged

forward, gauging his distance very badly. The sheriff stepped back and the momentum of Dick's drunken leap carried him to the floor. The knife blade sank into the pine. Then the sheriff had him by the collar.

"Give me a hand, Jim," he said. "We'll lock him up again, the old fool."

But the supper crowd melted away, leaving Sue almost alone in Aunt Belle's—with a big supply of prepared food. When the last of her few loyal customers had departed, she carried dirty dishes into the kitchen.

Jim found her crying there, but she quickly dried her eyes.

"Somebody made old Dick drunk," he said. "It ain't like him. He never touches a drop between sprees and his sprees are always two-three months apart. Somebody got him drunk on purpose. Prob'ly spiked his coffee or something. When he gets one taste, he has to have a quart."

"But who would do such a thing?" Sue asked.

Jim started to mention Bart Brownell, but he remembered the sheriff's advice. He also remembered that he and Sue had had an argument on the subject of Brownell. Sue had gone to a dance with him, had called him handsome; Jim had called him a grinning hypocrite.

So he didn't say anything. He merely shrugged, pulled his hat down and went out.

He almost collided with Brownell a block away.

"Well, well," said the big, laughing man, "you still around town, cowboy? How can the *rancho grande* get along without you?"

There was something casually insulting in his tone. Jim bristled. His right fist became a hard ball.

"Look here, Brownell," he said tensely, "I don't like what you're doing. I don't know why you're doin' it, but I don't like it. I aim to see—"

"What are you talkin' about?" Brownell drawled, his face expressionless. "I never aimed to go out of my way to please you, but you sure distress me—not likin' me. Just what is buzzin' around in there under your hat?"

Jim stepped closer to him. "You know what!" he declared. "You set the Chink up in business so's to make it harder for Sue. When she got old Dick to cookin', you got him soaked again. I don't know just why, but it's a mean, low-down trick, fightin' a girl, fightin' good old Aunt Belle when she ain't here to fight back."

"Why, you're loco, feller," Brownell drawled. "Why would I want to do the like of that? I'm mighty fond of Sue. Nobody I like more'n Aunt Belle. You got things twisted, buckaroo. The Chinaman come to me and wanted to rent my buildin'. I rented it, sure. That's only business, ain't it? I never thought he'd compete with Aunt Belle, seein' the hold she had on the trade. And now let me tell you a thing or two. You don't like me a-tall, and you got a right to your dislikes. Same as I have. But you go shootin' off your face, accusin' me of such things, and you're goin' to learn yourself a lesson."

"Why, you—" Jim began, at the same time starting a swing toward the Brownell jaw.

Brownell moved quickly. He drew his gun and bored into Jim's middle.

"I won't bust a knuckle on your ugly face," he said, "but for two bits I'd plug you."

Jim let his hand fall. He spat his contempt for a man who would draw a gun under such circumstances. He stepped back.

"All right, Brownell," he said. "Your smile hides plenty, but when you take it off you look plumb bad. Be seein' you."

Brownell put his gun away, turned and walked toward Aunt Belle's. Jim gritted his teeth. He knew what to expect. Brownell would go in there, sympathize with Sue, make her believe he was friendly. And Sue would believe him.

To get anywhere, Jim decided, he'd have to prove what he suspected. Have to prove that Brownell was financing

the Chinaman, deliberately trying to ruin Aunt Belle's business. That was it, all right, because Aunt Belle saw through him, was outspoken about him, disapproved of Sue accepting his escort. If he ran the business into the ground, while Aunt Belle was away, Sue would feel it was her fault. Then Brownell would play his ace card. He'd offer to buy out the Chinaman, rebuild the business for Aunt Belle. And Sue, grateful, would think he was not only handsome, but kind and generous. She might even marry him.

Jim knew too much about Brownell to permit that, if he could help it. Anybody else. But not Brownell.

But Sue was stubborn. The more Aunt Belle said against Brownell, the better she seemed to like him. Any more opposition and she'd up and marry him. There was only one thing to do. Jim had to prove what he suspected, what he really knew; had to prove it so there would be no doubt about it.

Jim lounged in front of the sheriff's office. A little later, he saw Sue and Brownell leaving Aunt Belle's. Brownell was walking home with her, up to Aunt Belle's little cottage. Brownell was laughing and Sue was looking up at him.

Jim dropped his cigarette, stepped on it and went into the sheriff's office. Old Hi Wayne was playing solitaire.

"How's your prisoner?" Jim asked.

"Doin' nicely," the sheriff grunted. "Be ready to go back to work in the mornin'."

"I want to talk to him."

"He ain't in a listenin' mood. You can hear him snorin'. Won't wake up till mornin'. Then he'll tell me what a low dog he is and how I ought to kill him. And I'll give him some hair off the dog that bit him and take him down to Aunt Belle's."

"I want to find out who got him started drinkin' again," Jim insisted.

The sheriff sighed. "Son, you'd best go home to the Apex. Them cow and calf critters are missin' you. You stick around town, gettin' your dander up, and the fust thing you know, you'll be in this jail, too. Leave law and order to me. It's my job."

Jim walked up and down the small room. "Sheriff, you know the same as I do that Brownell is behind this! And you know why!"

"I don't *know* anything. Same as you, I jest surmise. Surmisin' ain't knowin'. And in the sheriff business, you've got to know. You're gettin' madder and madder. I know the signs. You better fork your bronc and ride home 'fore you explode. Leave it to me. I'm slow, but sure. It ain't a crime to rent a buildin' to a Chink. It ain't even agin the law to set him up in business. And as for givin' a man a drink, that there is generally considered a friendly gesture." The sheriff shrugged and slapped a card down.

Jim uttered a disgusted sound, pulled his hat down and walked out. The sheriff chuckled and went on playing.

But Jim didn't take the sheriff's advice. He went to the room he had taken in the rooming house. He sat at the open window, smoking a cigarette, looking out over the town. He told himself that, regardless of Sue and what she thought of him, he owed it to Aunt Belle to protect her interests. She would expect it of him.

After some time, he saw Brownell coming back down the street. Brownell stopped in at the Chinaman's for a few minutes, then headed toward his own big house. He whistled as he walked along.

EARLY in the morning, Jim went to the sheriff's office. Old Dick was quite sober and very humble. He was about to leave for Aunt Belle's.

"If Miss Sue ain't plumb disgusted with me," he told the sheriff, "I'll go down and open up an' I'll work my head off."

"Who gave you that red-eye?" Jim asked.

Dick shook his head.

"The Mex kid that delivers groceries

for Haskins," said the sheriff, "toted a box of stuff to Aunt Belle's. There was a quart bottle in it. The kid don't know how come. Neither does Haskins. Dick aimed to take jest a swaller. But you know how it goes."

Looking at Dick writhing in humiliation, Jim hadn't the heart to say anything. The sheriff clapped the old cook on the shoulder and told him to go.

"We'll be down for breakfast shortly," he said. Then he turned to Jim. "You still hangin' around, huh? That's too bad."

They strolled down toward Aunt Belle's. Brownell passed them, heading toward the Chinaman's, and gave them a smiling "Good mornin', gents."

"The grinnin' hypocrite!" Jim said.

"There you go again!" observed the sheriff. "I don't know whether I ought to be seen eatin' with you, on account I'm certain sure I'll have to lock you up."

"Sta bien!" Jim said, and turned on his heel. He, too, headed for the Chinaman's.

"Hey!" said the sheriff. But when Jim paid no attention to him, he shrugged and went on, smiling a little.

When Jim walked quietly into the Chinaman's, there was no one there but Brownell and the cook. Brownell was talking. They didn't see Jim.

"I'll get rid of that old drunk today," Brownell was saying. "You cut your price to forty cents and give the boys more to eat. It won't take more'n two weeks, at that rate, to make the gal quit." At a nudge from the cook, he turned.

Brownell wasn't sure whether Jim had heard. Jim stood just inside the door. He had just entered. Brownell smiled.

"Hi, Fairfax," he said. "Back here, huh? I thought you'd be eatin' at Aunt Belle's."

Jim strode toward him. Then, from the expression on his face, Brownell knew that he had heard him.

"Stay away from me!" he said, his hand moving toward his gun.

"Why, you low-down—" Jim began, lunging forward as Brownell drew.

It was the frightened Chinaman, letting out a squeal, who collided with Brownell and ruined his aim. He fired; the bullet went through the window. Then Jim drove his left to Brownell's jaw, knocking him back against the counter. Brownell swung his gun at Jim's head. Jim ducked and sent his right to Brownell's midriff. The smiling man grunted, clutched the counter.

The Chinaman leaped at Jim, who pivoted quickly and knocked him to his knees. The Chinaman struggled up just as Brownell got his gun on Jim; he had a knife in his hand.

Jim knocked Brownell's gun hand down with his left, crashed another right to his jaw.

The sheriff, suddenly at the door, fired at the Chinaman, who held the knife high above Jim's back. He squealed, dropped the knife, gave the sheriff a startled look and dashed for the back door.

The sheriff let him go, but Deadwood Dick, who had run here with the sheriff, cut around the corner of the building, caught the Chinaman by the coat collar, and, sober as he was, began talking to him as he talked to the sheriff while drunk.

Brownell's right arm hung limp at his side. The sixgun dangled from his hand. His head rocked from side to side; he was groaning and seemed to be in great pain.

Sue, on her way to her place of business, heard the shot, saw Dick capture the fleeing Chinaman. Startled, she looked in and saw Brownell, dazed, almost knocked out, with Jim Fairfax standing over him, ready to deal out more punishment.

"Oh, Bart!" she cried. "What are they doing to you?"

She slipped between Brownell and Jim, faced Jim furiously.

"If you imagine you're helping me," she said scornfully, "I'd like you to understand I won't have you fighting over me. Bart told me how you threatened him, said you'd kill him. He couldn't help it if the Chinaman started

a restaurant. He thought he was going to open a store. He had leased him the building before he knew. It isn't his fault at all."

She clutched Brownell's arm as he swayed. The sheriff let out a cynical, high-pitched chuckle. Jim revealed his anger and disappointment.

"I wasn't fightin' for you," he said stiffly. "I was jest knockin' this crook's smile off his face, because I don't noways like it."

He turned on his heel.

The sheriff laughed again.

Sue exclaimed, "Sheriff, why do you permit that big range bully to come into town and cause trouble?"

The sheriff suddenly stopped laughing. "You mean Jim, Miss Susie? You callin' him a bully? Why, shucks, ma'am, Bart's as big as he is. Every time a boy starts fightin', I can't stop it. Jest a little fight ain't such a crime in these parts."

"Oh!" said Sue, putting her foot down angrily. Brownell slipped, leaned upon her. To support him, Sue put her arm around him.

The sheriff decided it was time for him to leave. He looked sheepish and surprised.

He saw Jim walking determinedly toward the barn where his horse was. Jim, he guessed, was at last going back to the Apex. The sheriff stood before his office, scratching his head. The ways of girls, and men, were sometimes beyond him.

Presently, old Dick came swaggering down the street, whistling. For a moment the sheriff thought he had emptied another bottle. But Dick was quite sober, and very happy.

"Hey, Hi," he said, "you got a big piece of cardboard and a red pencil in your office?"

"What you want with 'em?"

"Come on and I'll show you."

He led the way into the sheriff's office, took a reward notice down from the wall and turned it over. The sheriff tossed him a pencil. Old Dick printed on the white cardboard, in large letters:

CLOSED. On account the Cook Departed.

"Goin' to hang this on the Chink's door," he announced.

The sheriff seized his shoulder. "What you mean—departed?" he growled. "You mean dead?"

Old Dick grinned. "Not 'zackly. I didn't finish the job. Sure put a scare in him, though. The way I talked you'd 've thought I was drunk and the Chink was you. Tossed him on a train, in a cattle car, and told the boys with the beef to take care of him. Reckon he won't stop this side of Shanghai, or anyway Chinatown. Told him you'd lock him up on account of what you knew about him and Brownell, and, if you didn't, I'd scalp him. He has went."

Dick stood up. "Well," he said, "got to go down to Aunt Belle's and feed the hungry mob."

BROWNELL and Sue were already there. Dick passed Brownell's building, attached the cardboard sign to the door, and went on to Aunt Belle's. He began to stagger a short distance from the door, and when he walked in Sue gasped.

"Oh, Dick," she exclaimed, "you've been drinking again!"

"Dead drunk," he said, swaying. "And killin' mad!"

He went on into the kitchen, picked up a long, sharp knife, and turned back.

"You, Brownell!" he said. "Goin' to carve your heart out, like I did your Chink pardner! Yeah! He told me all about the deal you had with him. You know what this feller did, Miss Sue? I'll tell you! You bet I'll tell you. And then I'll start carvin'!"

"Dick!" she protested.

Brownell stood up, retreated a little. "You're drunk, man! Put that knife down. He's crazy drunk, Sue. He doesn't know what—"

Dick let out a wild yell, started for Brownell. The big man jumped behind the counter.

"Look at him, Sue!" Dick raved. "Look at the guilt on his ugly face! Aimin' to drive you out of bus'ness! Aimin' to wreck all Aunt Belle has built up! Chinaman's pardner! He put up the money! He started that eatin' place! All on account he wanted to get back at Aunt Belle, make you go broke—and then play the big-hearted friend! The Chink told me all about it. Aunt Belle's a friend of mine—ain't never turned me down for a meal yet. You been mighty nice, too, Miss Sue. Well, I'll fix Brownell for you! I'll carve him up and pickle the pieces!"

He started for Brownell again. Sue cried out. Brownell tried to find his gun. He had forgotten Jim had knocked it out of his hand. When he discovered he had no gun, when Dick relentlessly advanced, knife ready, Brownell suddenly broke and ran. He crashed through the door, ran into the street, and kept going.

Dick did not pursue him far.

He came back, chuckling to himself, and put the knife down.

Sue stared at him. "Why, you aren't drunk, Dick!"

"No, ma'am!" he declared. "Cold sober. And what I said wasn't red-eye talkin'. It was solemn truth. The Chinaman told me. Brownell's been pertendin' what a good friend he is, but he was sure out to break you and Aunt Belle."

Sue suddenly put her head down and began to sob. Dick touched her shoulder.

"There, there!" he said. "I'll get things goin'. We've got to feed a pack of hungry men."

"Did you—did you kill the Chinaman?"

"No, honey. I jest sent him on a trip."

"Oh, the things I said to Jim!" Sue wailed. "And he was right all the time. He's always right. That's the trouble with him!"

"Well," Dick said slowly, smiling, "a man like that is worth havin' around."

For some reason, Sue sobbed more. Jim, disgusted with tears, had gone back to the Apex. She felt sure that Jim would stay away from town. She wouldn't see him again—unless she put her pride aside, humbled herself, and rode out to tell him how sorry she was. But it was too late even to do that.

Dick let her cry it out while he got busy in the kitchen.

Half an hour later, he exclaimed: "Well, for cryin' out loud! Look who's comin'! Your Aunt Belle!"

Sure enough, Aunt Belle, who had just arrived on the morning train, was walking toward her place of business, looking very determined and competent, with Jim Fairfax on one side and the sheriff on the other.

Sue got up and ran to her aunt. The older woman put her arms around her and said: "It's all right, honey. What's all this I hear about folks causin' you trouble? Well, I'm back. Never felt better in my life. I'll show 'em can they wreck my business!"

As Aunt Belle released her, Sue was still tearful, almost blinded by tears. Perhaps that was why she landed in Jim's arms. Perhaps Aunt Belle actually thrust her into them.

At any rate, she found herself within the powerful circle of Jim's arms and she buried her face in his shoulder, as she had done before, and knew the comfort of his strength. He held her gently. She tried to utter words of apology.

But they proved unnecessary. For Jim was kissing her and she was kissing him in a way that wiped out all misunderstanding.

"You're coming home and cook for me, and me alone, darling," he said.

"I'll like that," Sue murmured.

Dark Destiny

THE STORY SO FAR:

ANN LAIRD, lovely young girl.
GARD HOLLISTER, fighting cowboy.
JIM BESTIAN, gunman claiming Rancho la Soledad.
JAKE LANDIS, Bestian's evil partner.
NETTIE BIXBY, old nurse who raised Gard.
SANDY RIDDLES, CHANCE WHITTAKER, KID EMORY and HARLE SCALLY, Gard's loyal pards.
DEPUTY SHERIFF TIPTON, the only law at Hargraves.
JOHN BURGE, honest old lawyer in Hargraves.
PTOLEMY POTTS, shyster lawyer handling only big cases.
BOGUS ANN LAIRD, fraudulent claimant to Dark Valley.
OLD ANTON, nicknamed the wolf-man.

Before Ann was born, her grandfather, Angus Laird, was wrongly accused of shooting his partner, Clayton Hollister. The two men had owned Rancho la Soledad in Dark Valley and had an agreement that the property would revert to the heirs of the surviving partner. After Clayton's murder, Angus wandered for years with his orphaned granddaughter, finally leaving her, upon his death, with the Thomsons, an aged couple who raised her.

Before his death Angus told Ann that when she was of age she could go to Hargraves, see Lawyer Burge, and claim her inheritance. This Ann decides to do and goes alone to Dark Valley where a bitter gun feud is being waged between Gard, Clayton's son, and Bestian, who claims to be old Laird's second cousin.

Bestian has taken his claim to court and crookedly won Rancho la Soledad, but Gard refuses to give up his old family home, making himself technically an outlaw. Ann meets Gard and they are deeply attracted to each other, so much so that Ann doesn't tell him her true identity—that it was her grandfather he thinks killed his father. However, Tipton, who knew Ann's mother, suspects her identity but says nothing.

Bestian, after trying to kill Gard, threatens Ann, so she and Nettie flee from the ranch to go to the town of Hargraves. While on the way there they are surrounded by the wolves that infest the country. Gard and his men rescue the two women. They run into a wild man who seems more wolf than man. He is old Anton, a crazed hermit who has interbred his vicious dogs with wolves.

Potts, with his client, the bogus Ann Laird, and

By Robert Dale Denver

Part Three

a group of nesters arrive at Rancho la Soledad to lay claim to it. This infuriates Bestian who unsuccessfully orders them off. Instead, they hole up at the ranch. Bestian's men in the meantime vainly attack Gard in Hargraves. The real Ann, after a conference with Burge, tells Gard who she really is.

CHAPTER XI

No More Fighting

HAD SHE slapped Gard Hollister, she could not have shocked him more. The smile faded from his lean face, leaving it with bleak and hard lines. Then he gave a short laugh.

"I guess something must be wrong with my ears," he drawled. "Just now I thought you said that you were—" As he looked into the girl's blue eyes he knew that he had heard rightly, and he let his voice trail off.

"Angus Laird's granddaughter," Ann finished for him. "My real name is Ann Laird. The Thomsons were my foster parents."

"And you wouldn't be joking about a thing like that," he said slowly. "So you're one of the Lairds? One of the family I was taught to hate." Dazed, confused, he lifted a hand and fumbled at his sombrero, moving it forward, then back, anything to give him time to adjust himself to this revelation.

The other riders had jogged on, leaving the two sitting their horses in the canyon entrance. Beyond, hemmed in by its mountain ridges, lay the trough of Dark Valley, with the usual evening mist blanketing the river and the tangle of lakes, marshes and bayous that hoarded the waters of the stream and kept them from flowing to the desert lands below.

The top of the isolated peak, Geronimo's Thumb, with craggy sides on which a goat could hardly have found

footing, was still in the sunlight, but its base and all the valley were cast over by gloomy shadows from the high mountain wall to the west. Seen so, the valley looked sinister, evil. Easy to see now, thought Ann Laird, where it got its name—Dark Valley. And dark and gloomy as well in history. Ever since the massacre of the Franciscan fathers at the old mission, hate and cruelty had ruled Dark Valley and its people. And Gard Hollister had not escaped their mark.

"Gard," she pleaded, "don't look so—as if I had hurt you. I told you who I was, not to hurt you, but to help you. And as you hate, don't forget that my grandfather, Angus Laird, died from heartbreak, knowing that he was wrongly accused of killing the man who had been his closest friend.

"The note that Clayton Hollister sent warning Grandfather to be prepared to shoot on sight was enough to justify the shooting as self-defense, but grandfather didn't stay to use it. He left Dark Valley because he was sick and old and he had lost everything here that could mean happiness. Gard, you can't keep up hate forever. And you can't blame Angus Laird for what a distant relative, this Jim Bestian, has been doing to you."

Gard Hollister, sitting hunched in the saddle, shoulders drooped, shook his head. "I don't, Ann," he said in a low voice. "I'm not one of these feudists that waits behind a tree to kill the great-grandson of the man that killed *his* great-grandpappy. But things rooted down deep in me from the time I was a boy are hard to pull out. Give me a little time. I admit that Jim Bestian has come to mean for me the Laird family. I was wrong there; I should have realized that he's only a very distant relative."

Ann's hands were clasped tightly to the top of the saddle horn. Gard reached out his brown hand to place it over her clasped ones. "Ann Laird," he said, "I'm sorry for my talk about Angus Laird. We've had no time to think in here; time only for fighting and hating. My uncles were bitter against Laird, but back in my mind it's always seemed queer that Laird, who had refused to let my father hire gunmen to keep miners from butchering Laird-Hollister cattle, should suddenly go berserk.

"Then Jim Bestian came along, making claim to La Soledad as second cousin of old Angus, and we thought of him as a Laird too. We knew that Bestian encouraged outlaws to come into this country. Rustlers killed my uncles, but whether Jim Bestian had anything to do with that or not, I don't know. It doesn't concern us. Ann, let's wipe the slate clean."

She nodded quickly, tears misting her blue eyes. "You know I will, Gard. We're not living back fifteen years ago; we're living now."

"Now," he echoed and his hand closed tight on both of hers. "But if you're Angus Laird's granddaughter and he lived some time after my father's death, then according to that old partnership agreement you're sole owner of Dark Valley. And my uncles and I have fought to hold it all these years for nothing."

"Gard!" she said sharply. "Don't say that. I'll never have anything to do with Dark Valley, even if a gold mine were found on it. I hate it for what it's done to the Lairds and Hollisters. Their fortunes were practically lost by the gold rush. Your father met death here; your uncles were ambushed and killed. In the first sight I had of the valley I saw you in a desperate running fight for your life. Net Bixby is right in asking: What good is it?

"Come away, Gard, and leave it," she went on pleadingly. "But if you do still want it, I'll turn over my claim to you. Lawyer Burge said today I would have no trouble in getting title. That would dispose of both Bestian and this woman who claims to be Ann Laird. But don't risk your life any longer for that." She nodded indignantly at the dusky trench of the valley.

Gard's shoulders lifted; he was smiling suddenly. "All right. It must be worth more than we can see in it, but I'm promising to do no more fighting over it—except in court. Lord knows, I've wanted it less than you do. I'd agree even to leave it to Jim Bestian, but it's not mine to give up now. It's yours."

"No," she said firmly. "I don't want it."

He laughed and his laugh, lighthearted, showed that Gard had dropped a load of worry. "It belonged once to the Hollisters and Lairds. We'll compromise. We'll call it ours. We'll ride out tomorrow—us, Net, Sandy and the other boys, and let lawyers do our fighting. I've a few horses back up a canyon that I want to gather and take out so the wolves won't get them. It will be like getting out of jail—to quit this country."

It meant more than that, Ann Laird knew. To Gard it was like being pardoned from a death sentence. He had been trained from boyhood by his uncles to defend Dark Valley and the struggle could have ended in only one way—in a bullet.

Now he could quit the fight. Jim Bestian had not even the shadow of a legal claim. If the Dark Valley ranch known as La Soledad should turn out to be worth the trouble, Gard and Ann would appeal to the governor to get possession.

Gard had dismounted to stand beside her, his hand still over hers. "You remember what I promised you?" he asked. "That if I ever got clear of this tangle, I'd start telling you I fell in love with you at first sight, and keep telling it until you believed me? Ann, you do believe me a little already? I never dreamed anyone could be half as sweet. Or half as pretty. I've always wanted to leave Dark Valley and ride out to start a ranch in country where there would be no fighting. I'm riding out now, Ann. Will you go with me to help hunt that new ranch?"

Queerly the farewell words of her foster mother, Prudence Thomson, popped into her mind: "You are ready, child, to take flight, to build a nest of your own." The girl thought of the hundreds of square miles of grassy mesas and valleys she had ridden over. Suitable for a ranch—and a nest. Ann blushed suddenly, not realizing how lovely she looked, with the color mantling her cheeks, her blue eyes soft, dreamy.

She hesitated. All her training in the quiet home of the Thomsons had been to avoid haste, to consider and decide calmly. Not to yield to such an impulse as possessed her now to say "Yes."

Yet the firm clasp of his brown, strong hand on hers, carrying the call of impetuous heart and blood, was hard to ignore. Standing tall, straight, beside her, the same strength and sheer courage that had defended this valley against Jim Bestian's outlaws was drawing her to him now, into his arms.

It was not fair for him to have spoken so soon after that running fight in Hargraves—when his danger had revealed just how much she did care for him. She was certain that she loved Gard. She could not trust herself to speak. Nor were words necessary. She knew she had but to meet his eyes; let him see the answer in them.

From some ridge above the valley came a harsh interruption in the silence of dusk—three short, sharp barks, then the menacing siren of a wolf, issuing a threat to all creatures within hearing. As darkness shuttered down under the mountain ramparts, the wolves of Dark Valley were beginning to stir.

Ann shivered. The spell that Gard Hollister had cast was gone. She was back again in the world of hate and fear. In Dark Valley there was no room for love.

"I don't know, Gard," she said frankly. "I can't know yet. That wolf howl frightened me. Gard, I'm afraid that we may never get out of here."

"We'll go tonight, if you say so," he promised.

Again the wolf howl came, and others joined in. The girl shivered, remembering the pack that had come out of the foggy dark to attack her and Net Bixby. "Not tonight. It isn't safe. Tomorrow morning."

He swung into his saddle and at a lope they clattered on to catch the rest of the party.

"You hear them friends of ours tunin' up for the concert?" asked Sandy Riddles.

"Don't call them wolves no friends of mine," said Net Bixby. "Let's git to a house where a body can lock a door. You men got to take us all the way to the ranch."

"Why don't you come to our camp for tonight?" suggested Sandy. "We'll show you a place where you could laugh at a army—either wolves or men."

"Yes, why not?" urged Gard. "Tomorrow we're picking up those horses in Cotton Canyon and heading out of the country. Camp with us tonight, Net, and we'll be all ready to start together in the morning."

"You're leaving the Valley!" exclaimed Net Bixby unbelievingly. "For good? I never thought I'd live to see the day a Hollister had that much sense. You really meant that, Gard?" And suddenly old Miss Bixby in her relief was weeping unashamedly.

CHAPTER XII

"End of Your Rope"

GERONIMO'S THUMB, the tall pillar of a mountain that stuck up from Dark Valley like a giant headless mushroom, was shrouded in darkness as they rode toward it, threading their way through the tall thickets of the river bottoms. The mist along the stream was getting thicker; another foggy night threatened.

Near the Thumb the party turned in closer to the river, over earth that was soggy under foot, where horse hoofs plopped often into puddles of water. The pasture used for holding the saddle mounts, Gard explained, was a small hidden island in one of the finger-like lakes made by the river. Secure from wolves, it offered good grass also. They dismounted and cached their saddles in a thicket, and then Chance Whittaker and Kid Emory took the horses to the pasture and swam back.

On foot the seven people picked their way along a muddy path to the base of the Thumb. The trail to the hiding place was too steep for horses; in fact, the start of it was not a trail at all, but a climb up a crevice between two huge masses of rock. Above this they mounted steeply along a trail which angled up a cliff.

"Got our camp in a sort of fold of the mountain where no one can see our fire from the valley," explained Gard, holding Ann's arm to guard her against a fall. "Happened to find the place when I was exploring the Thumb as a boy, and after Bestian ran on to our hole-up camp in the mountains, we came here."

The moon was shining half-heartedly through the mist and, taking her bearings by it, the girl realized that they were now on the north wall, the most precipitous side of the Thumb. There was barely enough light to show the cliffs that fell sheer below them.

A few minutes later, picking their way carefully along a ledge, they came into a narrow passageway between two looming tilted slabs of rock. Beyond was a shelf where Ann saw the shapes of tarp-covered beds under an overhang of rock which provided fair shelter. At the far end was a straight drop.

"We ain't got around to puttin' up a fence around the back yard yet," said Sandy. "So don't take no strolls in that direction."

The men started a little fire, revealing the camp, their personal belongings, iron grids and utensils for cook-

ing, beds, rough stools. In one corner lay two beef hides on which Kid Emory and Chance Whittaker had been working, passing away the time by fashioning them into various cowboy accessories.

"So this is where you stay?" said Net Bixby looking about her. "Just the place men would pick out. No floor to sweep, no windows to wash—just suits a lot of shiftless cowboys. I've told you often enough, Gard, that you'd forget what a house is for."

As the flames crackled, the men began to prepare supper. A small spring emerged from a big rock near-by, and a big tin tub was kept under it to catch the drip.

A peaceful enough scene, thought Ann, until she realized that there had been a sudden change. It had begun when Gard had started whistling a little tune. After that the men who had laid aside their rifles drifted casually nearer them.

Gard, she guessed suddenly, had smelled out danger, as he had sensed it in the old mission, and the five were exhibiting the coolness which had fooled the bushwhackers in Hargraves.

"Men up here; we've got to duck to cover," he murmured in her ear as he passed. "Just stay where you are. We're going to put out the fire and get back under that overhang."

Gard moved over to the tubful of water. "Got to wash out some clothes tonight, Sandy," he called. "Help me lift that tub over on the big grid."

"Shore," said Sandy. "But dang if we oughtn't to git us a Chink up here to do our laundry work. And our cookin', too."

The two men lifted the filled tub of water and carried it across to set it on the straps of iron that made a stove. When they had it in the air the two suddenly overturned it on the fire. Instantly a blinding cloud of steam hissed up from the extinguished flames.

In the darkness a strong pair of arms swept Ann from her feet to carry her under the overhang.

A belated yell came from a tilted brushy slope above the camp and then the crash of a gun, followed by half a dozen others. The shots hit the rocks and ricocheted off snarlingly, but the little party was too far back for bullets to reach. As if realizing that, the men stopped shooting and Jim Bestian's voice floated down.

"You must be half hound, Hollister," he called, "to smell out trouble. I don't know how you got out of Hargraves, but you ain't gittin' out of here. You should of fixed you a back trail when you picked a camp. I got plenty men to block the trail out and more coming. No night is going to be so dark that you can come back out along the trail. And you'd have to be a fly to climb up or down outa there."

"He said a mouthful," growled Sandy. They were in a pocket, and like all pockets it had only one entrance. There was no hope of stealing noiselessly along that narrow trail. To try a rush would be suicide.

"You've run to the end of your rope!" shouted Bestian tauntingly. "Saw your fire last night when you played hero to rescue Net and that girl from the wolves, and we figured where you'd been hiding. Been layin' for you here in case you got outa Hargraves. Men below saw you put your horses away and they've already got 'em. I been wantin' that trick sorrel of yours, Gard. And I hate to do it, but I'll have to take over that girl of yours, too."

Gard was standing near Ann and she felt his arm tense. "End of our rope," he muttered. "That Bestian is a real help. Rope. You get it, Sandy?"

"Rope," repeated Sandy Riddles questioningly. "Huh, we ain't got no rope 'cept that rawhide lariat Chance's been workin' on. It ain't over twenty foot long, and we'd need forty more to get down to that first ledge."

"We've got a couple of beef hides," said Gard. "We'll make us something that will pass for rope. If we can get to 'em."

The ambushed had retreated to a place where it was a waste of bullets to try to get at them. Nevertheless Bestian's guns started up suddenly, sending bullets slapping against rocks. Gard and the rest crawled forward with their rifles and waited to fire almost as one at the spot where they saw flame spurting from an enemy gun barrel.

There came the yell of a man who had been hit. After that for a while Bestian's men were too cautious to do any shooting. During that interval Gard and Kid Emory crept out to bring back the hides and the short length of lariat.

There was a long silence after that as the thick fog, rising from the river, crept up the side of the pinnacle, bringing almost complete darkness with it. It was an uncomfortable, nerve-wracking silence, until from out in the valley wolf howls arose, the hunting cry of some pack.

"Wolves!" said Net Bixby. "Four-legged ones and the two-legged kind that wear chaps. If it ain't one, it's t'other. Lord help us to get out of Dark Valley," she said in a voice that was like a prayer.

Ann patted her shoulder. She liked this angular, sharp-tongued woman who had been brought in years ago to take care of motherless five-year-old Gard Hollister.

In the darkness sharp knives were slicing the hides into strips, making a rough sort of rope to be used in an escape down the cliff. Occasionally one of the five moved out to empty a rifle, making a bluff at trying to drive Bestian's men from the trail.

"Sandy is the last to slide down this rope when we git it done," said Kid Emory. "He's the heavy-weight."

"Don't worry about me bustin' no rope," said Sandy. "If I'm scared bad enough, I kin make myself light as a feather. I could almost float down off this mountain."

When the rope was nearly finished, Gard called to Bestian, intending to prepare for the silence that would necessarily follow when his little group took leave.

"What's your best terms, Bestian?" he called.

"Now you're talkin' sense," growled the man. "I got another job to do, and I'd like to git this over with. Tomorrow when daylight comes, we can bring up dynamite and blast you out. My terms is you march outa there and give up your guns. Then hand me a quit-claim deed to Rancho la Soledad."

Gard hooted. "You've said enough, Bestian," he shouted. "We'll stick here. In the morning bring on your dynamite and do your damnedest. We're turning in for a night of shut-eye."

Answering this defiance, Bestian's gang sent in another hail of bullets which spatted against the rock wall and whined off. The five, carrying out the bluff of going to sleep, made no reply.

Sandy and Gard, on the rim of the cliff, paid out the rope over it. The narrow ledge below did not mean safety, but it did mean the chance for an escape along the craggy mountain side.

"Me slide down a rope?" whispered Net nervously. "I'll stay here and starve first."

"We've fixed up a loop for you to sit in, sweetheart," said Sandy, "and we'll lower you down. But remember, no screechin'."

Kid Emory and Chance Whittaker slid down first, and then the rope was pulled up and in the darkness Net trusted herself to a chair-like contrivance made from straps. She swung over the ledge while Sandy, Gard and Harle Scally lowered her carefully.

Ann, who had never taken a dare from a boy in Pleasant Valley, did not wait to go down in the seat; she slipped over the edge and with the makeshift rope about one leg, slid down it mountain climber style. The rope was only strips of wet leather, and once she was over the edge she regretted that she had not chosen to ride down in the

seat like a lady. It was then too late. There was nothing to do but slide and pray. Then the arms of the two men below received her and her boot heels touched the rocky ledge.

A minute later and the three remaining men had followed and they stood in darkness, so intense that strain their eyes as they would, they could penetrate it but a few feet. The moon had given up all hope of shining long before.

Gard had looped the upper end of the rope so that it could be flipped off the snag to which it had been tied. They would need it in making their way off the mountain. The agile Kid Emory, with the rope about his waist, explored the next step; found it thirty feet below, and the others followed with the rawhide strand as guide. The descent was dangerous and painfully slow.

Net Bixby had to be lowered down many a drop. Had it been light enough for Net to see just what she was descending, she would have had to be carried down, unconscious.

Using the rope as guide, and occasionally to slide down small cliffs, they arrived finally, bruised and battered, minus considerable clothing and skin, on the bottom. They could hear, through the fog, furious bursts of gunfire floating down from the vicinity of the camp they had quitted. Jim Bestian was evidently frantically trying to discover whether the silence from the people he had hemmed in was merely a ruse to lure him closer or whether possibly his quarry had in some way slipped by him.

A brief council was held. Bestian's men already had the Hollister horses. They might stumble on them somewhere in the darkness but it was improbable, and if they did, it meant more fight. Hoofs sounded and riders passed, men, they guessed, of the outlaw group which had been hiding in Hargraves. That meant too many men to fight. They decided to get mounts from the mountain canyon where Gard had been holding the remainder of his saddle band.

Chance and Kid Emory were to hurry on ahead to drive them down canyon into the corral where the rest of the party would meet them. Then making hackamores, they would ride bareback to the ranch headquarters to patch up old saddles for the journey to Cass. Their other saddles as well as the horses, including Ann's mount, Spades, would have to be given up, at least temporarily.

During the night there had been sporadic bursts of howls from the wolves. Ann had a fear of crossing the valley afoot, but it was not far from day and this party was too strong to be in any danger. As for the men, they were all inclined to look on the wolf-dog crosses as no different from ordinary wolves—the kind that ran from a man with a gun. And to feel patronizingly that, while a pack might have attacked a pair of terrified women, it would never have dared jump men.

CHAPTER XIII

"You Overgrowed Mutt!"

THE PARTY, minus Chance and Kid Emory, started out briskly for the mountain wall, moving through pockets of fog so thick sometimes that a rider would have been unable to see the ears of his horse.

Reaching the mouth of the small canyon where the horses had been running, they moved up it, heading for the corral. Gard explained that the pasture was practically wolf-proof; where the canyon began to box up, they had built a high fence to keep out wolves.

They had gone perhaps a mile up the canyon when they heard on the slope above them the howl of a wolf. It was answered by distant animals and then the canyon was filled with the loud clamor of the brutes.

"This wolf situation is getting plumb serious," admitted Gard. "Thought we'd killed off most of them last month, and here they are back, thick as fleas on a sheepherder's dog."

"Here? Where?" asked Miss Bixby with a yelp of terror.

"You need have no fear, ma'am," said Sandy Riddles. "I hope we do meet a few. It's a favorite trick of mine on meetin' a wolf to stick my hand down his throat and turn him inside out."

The fog was still so thick and full daylight so far away that they could see only a distance of a few yards. A dusky twilight filled the canyon; under the scattered pines they had the eerie sensation of being in a dense forest.

The wolf howls had stopped, and there came only the sound of the scuffing boots of the walkers, until from the canyonside above them a howl sounded, the call of a hunting wolf. This one was so deep and loud that it was like a bellow from some prehistoric monster.

Ann's heart began beating violently and the men were uneasy. No man, however brave, can hear without shivering the howl of a hunting wolf, even in these modern days when wolves supposedly do not attack humans. Something still tells man that wolves are to be feared, probably a deep instinct that goes back to the days when cavemen, armed with only crude spears or javelins, fought desperately with yelping beasts.

They listened while somewhere farther down the canyon came the high-pitched howls of a pack on a trail.

"Me," said Sandy Riddles, "I'm coming back to do some trapping in here. When—"

Then it came without warning, the almost deafening howl they had heard before, and a huge gray shape loomed up in the lemon-tinged light under the trees. The beast stopped a few feet away from them, to remain standing there, his jaws wide apart, revealing the black cavern of his mouth, lips drawn back from his huge teeth, his hackles raised, his bushy tail high.

They were all petrified by the beast's sudden appearance. In the murky light he appeared larger than he really was, but he was a monster nevertheless, dog and wolf mixed, blockier in build than a wolf, evidently from Great Dane or mastiff blood. The short head was typical wolf, however, the jaws square, huge. A blackish stripe ran down his back; his gray fur was lighter over his ribs.

Standing, with a hoarse snarling issuing from his throat, his greenish eyes baleful, he stared at them for some seconds. There was no fear in him; quite the opposite, as if deciding which to attack first. At any instant they realized he was going to charge.

It was Net Bixby who broke the spell. She, who had been in the greatest terror of wolves, was at the moment the calmest person in the party.

"Scat, you overgrowed mutt!" she said to the wolf, and then to Sandy: "Let's see you reach down his throat and turn *him* inside out, like you was just sayin'."

At the sound of the human voice the big animal gave a great bellow of hatred and menace, and then sprang straight toward oldish Harle Scally.

The three men were bringing their guns into action, Gard and Sandy firing at him as he sprang. Struck, he turned to leap at Gard, who sent another bullet straight into the big chest. The huge beast started to collapse, a hideous mixture of snarls and roars coming from his throat, the great jaws snapping repeatedly like a hundred bear traps. Sandy sent another shot into the lighter fur over the ribs and the beast went down, biting ferociously at a rock on the ground, his powerful teeth crunching on it as if it were a bone. Then abruptly he was still.

"Look at it," said Sandy Riddles, awed. "Who'd ever believed there was such a dang critter as that? It could

lick a full-growed mountain lion and give the first bite. And he just charged us like he was a whole pack. Like those dang wolves night before last—as if they'd never heard of guns or never figgered they was anything dangerous."

"Or maybe," said Ann thoughtfully, "as if they'd been trained to hate guns."

This gigantic specimen, which dwarfed the members of the pack that had jumped Ann and Net Bixby, would leave a track over half a foot long. He was a wolf in the main, mixed with a large breed of dog, to form an abnormal variation; a freak. Powerful, savage, he was all the more terrifying because of the absence of a fear of men or guns. The wolves in the valley attacked men, there was no doubt about it now, and not because of the drive of hunger but as if from a savage hatred for people.

Secretly they were all thinking back to Anton, the wold-man as Sandy had called the crazed oldish fur-garbed fellow that they had roped below Hargraves for a joke. Yet there was no obvious connection.

Following the shots the canyon was filled with the howls of numerous other wolves. Gard was uneasy about Chance and Emory.

Then a whistle, sharp, shrill, came from somewhere on the canyonside. Oddly the howling ceased abruptly. Minutes passed while the men held loaded six-shooters and rifles ready for an attack. But nothing happened. No further howls sounded. They grinned at each other, feeling suddenly ridiculous.

"Did you hear what I heard?" Gard asked Ann.

"It sounded like a whistle to me," she stated. "And it seemed that the wolves shut up as soon as they heard it, and it looks as if they'd disappeared. Which of course is crazy. Wolves don't answer a whistle and go away like dogs called to supper, even in your Dark Valley."

Gard shrugged his shoulders. "Nothing crazy about it," he said lightly. "It's a nice thing to remember, Ann. Here in Dark Valley if you haven't got any wolves and you want some, all you've got to do is to whistle for 'em. And don't forget it's *your* Dark Valley, Miss Ann Laird. I've washed my hands of it. Whoever it belongs to, let's get out of it."

She laughed, but it was a shaky laugh. Wolf-dog combinations that looked as big as a pony were hard to laugh off.

The men stooped over the fallen body of the big beast for a final look before proceeding up canyon to the place where they were to meet Chance and Kid Emory. This giant monster was incredible. They had never seen anything like it before, and secretly they were hoping they never would again.

They didn't admit it, but the whistle they had heard bothered them too. And again although they did not mention him, they were recalling Anton, the crazed old fellow who had escaped lynching one time in Hargraves after some of his pet dogs had killed some miner children.

"Looks to me like the end of the human race," observed Sandy pessimistically. "This here breed of animals is going to take over the world while people hide out all the same as coyotes. Wolves will be loping into all the cities and yankin' people out of street cars."

"Sandy can joke," Ann said soberly to Gard, "but this is queer. Almost like living back in caveman days. I'm afraid. Really afraid, for the first time in my life. I used to think it wasn't right, a world where women couldn't be as independent as men. I'm glad it's the way it is," she confessed. "I'm glad you men were here to shoot down that brute. Supposing Net and I had met one like that?"

"I'd hate to think what would happen if *anybody* met a bunch of Net's overgrown mutts," admitted Gard Hollister.

CHAPTER XIV

Outlaw Menace

FEW MINUTES later they heard the beat of hoofs and the horses came down canyon, with Chance Whittaker and Kid Emory riding double on an old mare they had succeeded in cornering.

"Thought we heard some shooting down here," said Chance.

"Miss Bixby imagined she saw a wolf," explained Sandy Riddles. "Gard, how about toppin' off my Buster horse for me? I never was one of these here circus bareback riders."

There were fifteen horses in the bunch, and rapidly the men fashioned hackamores for those they would use as mounts.

"Time we was gettin' these horses outa here, Gard," said Kid Emory. "Wolves killed that pinto mare and her colt."

Gard nodded and helped Net Bixby and Ann mount their horses. "Time not only horses, but men too, were getting out, Kid. We'll drop by the ranch and, if it's clear of Bestian, stop to rig us up some saddles. If any of his gang is around, we'll dodge trouble and ride on."

"I can't believe my ears," said Net Bixby. "What's tamed you, you wild fire-eater? You talk peaceful as a cooin' dove."

Old Sandy winked broadly. "Gard talked the same peaceful way jist after he'd met that dark-eyed gazelle of a prospector's daughter," he remarked. "'Lowed he'd quit fighting and take up prospectin'."

"Gard talked that way, too, after he'd met that young hoss-trader's widder," said old Harle Scally. "Said he was dodgin' fights. Love makes a man peaceful."

"Quit your lying, you old reprobates," ordered Net Bixby, who had fond ideas of a romance between Ann and Gard and didn't want it ruined.

They were in good spirits. The four men with Gard knew that the battle against Bestian had been hopeless even before the new outlaw group had arrived in Hargraves.

They were not yet out of danger, however; Jim Bestian's men might be raking the mountain for them. Cautiously they traveled along the bench toward old Mission la Soledad, keeping one man out as scout to the side, one up ahead. Gard on the valley side, as the mists scattered, saw a lone rider along the Hargraves trail, the deputy sheriff, Lew Tipton, heading also for Rancho la Soledad. Gard rode out to signal the deputy to join them.

Tipton greeted them all in his usual quiet manner. If he was surprised to see them riding bareback, he hid it.

"Thought you might like to know, Lew," said Gard, "that peace is coming to Dark Valley. We're pulling out. What fighting is done after this will be done in court."

"You—you're leaving?" said the deputy, and for an instant he appeared stirred from his ordinary calm. "Can't blame you after that death trap they were set to spring on you yesterday. I never thought Bestian could bring in so many outlaw gun-fighters. Giving up your claim to the Valley to him, Gard?"

"Nope; not to Bestian," Gard stated with a grin. "To Miss Ann Laird here. The *real* Ann Laird. Not that girl at the mission. She's plain fake. You can testify yourself that this Miss Laird looks a lot like Angus Laird's daughter-in-law."

Tipton hesitated as he studied Ann Laird. "One could say she looks a little like Angus Laird's daughter-in-law," he admitted. "But I had no suspicion that she was any connection."

Ann was puzzled by the officer's reply. Certainly from his questions two nights before, he had had a very definite suspicion. Why did he deny it now?

"Anyway," went on Gard, "the wolves and Bestian can have the valley until it's decided in court. You of-

fered to get those warrants against us called in if we left the valley. That offer still good?"

Tipton considered the matter in his deliberate way and nodded. "Still good," he said.

Gard grinned. "Even without Bestian's outlaws, this country's too dangerous. Too many wolves. There's a new kind in the country, too, the next biggest thing to a elephant we ever saw."

"Queer thing," said Tipton. "Tom Colby at Hargraves said he saw a man a few evenings ago with a pack of the biggest dogs he'd ever seen, a man dressed in furs, it looked like. He didn't see 'em close, but, of course, they had to be dogs."

"Sounds like the same man," remarked Gard, "we saw yesterday, but he didn't have any dogs. Sandy says that it was old Anton who used to be in Hargraves. You remember him, Lew?"

"The man whose big dogs killed those children just after I became marshal? I wouldn't forget him. They'd have lynched the cuss if they'd of caught him. He made threats then that he would get even some time. Went crazy, I guess. A rancher told me five years ago he'd run across old Anton back in the Seven Canyons country. Had a pack of monster dogs that almost ate up this rancher's horse 'fore Anton called them off. Anton wouldn't talk; just waved for the rancher to ride on."

"Talkin' about dogs and such," said Harle Scally, pointing at the ground. It had rained a little here during the night, and plain to be seen in the damp earth were the tracks of a wolf pack, foot-prints of wolves of ordinary size, and two sets of tracks the size of the giant that they had killed in the canyon.

The men all dismounted, but it wasn't because of the wolf prints. They were interested in the moccasin tracks mingled with those of the wolves, some of the moccasin tracks over those of the big wolves, others covered by the dog prints. And the tracks had been made at the same time.

The men looked at one another for a half-minute, no one saying a word. Ann, who had tracked horses and cattle on range work, realized what held the men so silent, but Net didn't.

"Well, what is it?" asked Net Bixby. "Chirp up. You all look like you seen something mighty strange."

"We have," said Gard Hollister grimly. "See those wolf prints? And those moccasin tracks mixed with 'em?"

"Sure, but what of 'em?" asked Net, annoyed. "He was bein' chased probably, poor feller."

"No; that's the queer part. He wasn't being chased. He was *with* those animals. Trotting right along with the pack. That whistle we heard this morning was this fellow's whistle. He was calling whatever you'd call the wolf-dog mixtures we've been seeing. This valley is filling up with wolves, and old Anton has something to do with it."

"That accounts for the doggy smell the fellow had," said Kid Emory. "He's turned wolf hisself."

"Gard," said the deputy, "these wolves are bad enough, but I know something a lot more serious. That woman at the ranch may be mistook in claimin' to be Ann Laird, but Jim Bestian don't think she's any fake. He's gone crazy mad over the idea that someone has come along with a better claim than his to la Soledad property. He knows only one way to fight—with guns. He's going to wipe out that woman and the pilgrims that come along with her, too. Make a clean sweep."

"Bestian has chased us around," said Gard. "But he wouldn't jump a bunch of families."

"Jim Bestian is crazy enough to do just that," said the deputy emphatically. "He figures to give this whole country such a bloody name people will stay out of it. Some of that Hargraves gang

talked plenty free; they're riding to jump the Mission tonight. That lawyer, Potts, and his woman client and the caravan of pilgrims are no match for Bestian's bunch. It will be a massacre there tonight, just like it was when the Indians attacked the Spanish priests."

"You'd better be getting help for those people then," said Gard. "Or hustling them out of here."

"No chance of doing either. I've sent word to the town of Cass, but the sheriff is scared paralyzed. If the settlers pulled out they'd be in the open, where Bestian could mow 'em down. I'm going to ask a favor of you, Gard. I never asked a favor in my life but I need help in protecting those pilgrims. They won't assay much as fighters, but if your bunch forted up with them, I think we could hold Bestian off."

"I think you're wrong," said Gard grimly. "We'd have a poor chance, and besides we're through fighting. We're all sick of it. And besides," he said, waving a hand to indicate Ann Laird and Net Bixby, "we've got two women depending on us for protection. We're taking them to Cass where they'll be safe. You've got to get help somewhere else."

"Gard's right," burst out Sandy Riddles. "Them pilgrims is nothin' to us. A day ago, Lew, you had warrants for our arrest on account of killing a skunk, and now you ask us to help protect people against the gang that polecat belonged to. You got gall."

"I know," admitted the deputy. "I got no right to ask, but there's women and children in that wagon bunch. Somebody's got to help 'em against Bestian; they don't know how to fight. But it's up to you men to decide."

Net Bixby sighed deeply. "I knowed it was too good to be true—our leaving this country," she stated. "If not for the kids, I'd say let 'em all look after theirselfs. Them grown-ups follered that slick lawyer and that yaller-haired no-good female into this country same as rats follerin' a bait of cheese. But them kids. . . ."

"We can't leave, of course, now," Ann Laird agreed. "If you're needed, Gard, you have to stay."

Gard nodded reluctantly. "We stay on one condition: That we'll take you and Net far enough along the road to Cass to know that you'll get there safe. Then we'll ride back to help these people."

"Me, I don't leave here until you do, Gard," said Net Bixby firmly. "I said it once; I say it again."

"We're all in this together," said Ann quietly. "We'll all stay. Besides, you've admitted that this is my valley. I feel a responsibility for what happens here."

"And I feel a responsibility for what happens to you," he murmured for her ears only. "More than for those strangers. It's not right, Ann, to keep you and Net in danger."

"We can't leave those families helpless," she told him, and he had to nod agreement.

Sober-faced, they rode on with the deputy, toward the old Mission la Soledad, headquarters now for Dark Valley Ranch. They owed the pilgrims no debt, save that of plain humanity.

It was a peaceful scene that they saw in the courtyard of the old Mission. Wash was strung on ropes across the lower end of the yard. Cows were grazing peacefully in a corner. The wagons had been unloaded. Children ran and whooped and scuffled; babies tumbled before the doors of the grain and storerooms which had been given to the pilgrims for their living quarters.

The *padres* of the old days would have looked on approvingly, for so the children of their Indian charges must have played happily before the massacre and the wrecking of the Mission.

CHAPTER XV

Fort la Soledad

PTOLEMY POTTS, the little pink-whiskered lawyer who had conducted the settler wagon train into Dark Valley, emerged from a room.

Ann's rival claimant to the property,

the blonde of uncertain age, appeared also, to stand in a doorway, hands on hips, smiling flirtatiously at the three younger cowboys.

"I've brought some help, Mr. Potts," said Tipton. "You're going to need it. It's certain that Bestian's bunch is jumping you people tonight. These five here are real fighters. I figure with their guns helping we ought to be able to hold this place."

Potts gazed sourly at the five, and then waved his arms suddenly. "But this idea of an attack is preposterous, Tipton!" he burst out. "This is civilized country; civilized times."

"You're not talkin' of Dark Valley," said Tipton in his phlegmatic way. "You're a lawyer; you think there's law everywhere. There's none here. I'm not one that scares easy, but there's going to be a raid tonight. One of Bestian's men in Hargraves let slip the information. Those outlaws will be riding in here after dark with guns, savvy? We've got to get this place made into a fort by then."

The deputy turned in his saddle to address the settlers who had gathered. "You men hear me? You'll have to get busy and fix up a fort here. Where the walls around this courtyard are down, we'll need a dirt bank to close in the gaps, savvy? Get your shovels and start usin' 'em."

"Who, us, mister?" asked one of the settlers languidly. "Hell, nobody is goin' to jump us. We're pioneers and the governor would call out the troops to protect us. We didn't come up here to fight; we come for the free farms this lawyer promised us. And ain't showed us yet," he added aggrievedly. "We can't farm seep land like that down in the—"

"And if our lives is in the slightest danger," put in one of the wives, "it will cost you a purty penny, Mister Potts. You can't put the lives of pioneers like us in danger without—"

"All right!" shouted Mr. Potts, cringing from these complaints. "All right. I never saw such a bunch. And they call themselves pioneers! Phooy!"

"Maybe now you might hire us to throw a little dirt," said one of the men craftily. "Team and man would be six dollars a day and a man alone would be three dollars."

"Hire 'em, then!" Tipton told Potts. "Offer 'em what they ask; the damn fools won't live to collect it anyhow."

"But," said Mr. Potts, paling a little, "if you think we're in real danger here, we've got to get out. Hitch up and leave."

"Sure," said one of the settlers. "We're pullin' out soon's we can git our horses throwed in harness."

"Go ahead," said Tipton angrily. "Get out in the open where you'll have no cover. Camp out down in the valley tonight, and if Bestian's men don't get you, the wolves will. You had a taste of 'em the other night. There's a lot more in here now—pourin' in from somewhere. You've got a chance here if you get to work. You fools, your lives are at stake! Can't you savvy that? These outlaws don't want anyone in this valley. They're going to wipe you out. There's no time for the governor to send in the militia. Take your choice between trying to get out and staying here and fighting with my help and these five."

"First time I ever seen Tipton show any concern for anybody," muttered Sandy Riddles to Gard. "Acts like it would cost him something if these people was hurt. It ain't possible he's got a heart instead of that lump of granite I figgered done his blood pumpin'."

The yellow-haired young woman, visibly alarmed but not forgetting to swing her hips in what she imagined was a seductive way, came closer. "I never would have come here if I had imagined there was any danger," she said scoldingly. "You had no right to put my life in danger."

"How about our lives, young lady?" asked a woman, wriggling a finger under the yellow-haired woman's nose. "Lurin' us into a den of outlaws with a promise of free farms."

Slowly the fact that they might be in danger was soaking into the people. And

suddenly their indifference gave way to panic-stricken alarm. The woman who claimed to be the heir to Rancho la Soledad fainted, luckily so close to young Chance Whittaker that that alert cowboy was able to catch her in his arms. With both Kid Emory and Chance fanning vigorously with their sombreros, she came back gracefully to life.

The rest, once their panic was quieted, agreed to get to work. Gard was put in charge of the job of throwing up the necessary earth wall. Harle Scally was to place barricades on the roofs of the long row of rooms on the north, while Deputy Tipton was to cut rifle loopholes in the main building that was used as a ranch house.

"Closing the gaps in this big courtyard makes too much of a fort for us to hold," objected Gard. "We'll have twenty men at most. Why not cut it in half, run a dirt bank from the end of the old church wall straight across to that row of rooms?"

Tipton nodded approvingly. "You've learned something in your years of fighting, Gard. Get at it. We've grub to stand a week's siege and horse feed to last a few days."

With a half-dozen activities under way, the sleeply old mission was transformed into a beehive, men, women and children working in a feverish haste.

Under Gard's direction, teams were hastily hitched to plows and light scrapers, to begin throwing up a high bank of earth across the courtyard. On the long flat roof of the row of rooms, Harle Scally and Chance Whittaker piled adobe bricks to make a loopholed parapet behind which riflemen could crouch. Teams and saddle horses would be stabled in the thick-walled rooms below, while the settlers moved into the ranch house.

In the tile-roofed main building Net Bixby and Ann were apportioning quarters to the families as they moved in. When the bogus Ann Laird insisted, in view of her importance, on having a room to herself, rather than argue, they gave it to her. The meals were to be cooked community style in the big fireplace of the kitchen.

Meanwhile Tipton, helped by Potts and a couple of men, was making the same building into what would if necessary be a last-stand defense. Its tile roofs and thick walls were proof against both bullets and fire. Holes were punched in the adobe so that rifles could be fired in any direction. Under the arches earth was piled in a barricade.

In the courtyard steadily the work teams pulled scrapers and plows to build a high embankment. A deep ditch was left on the outer side intended as further defense.

During the afternoon Gard made a discovery—a half-dozen spools of bright new barbed wire in a settler wagon, brought in to use for corrals and pasture fences. The wire gave Gard an idea. If a fence kept out stock, why couldn't it be used to keep out men? Filled with that notion, he hurriedly sent Sandy Riddles to cut posts in back of the Mission.

Ann Laird, volunteering to snake the logs in for Sandy, borrowed a saddle and cinched it on her chunky little bay pack horse, Atlas. Which promotion to a saddle mount did not please Atlas; in fact, having been a pack horse all his life and a member in good standing of the Pack Horse Union, he held the strongest objections. If Ann's black gelding, Spades, wasn't there to carry his mistress, that was the girl's tough luck; she could walk.

He began a hectic pitching exhibition when Ann mounted but as her spurs dug into his ribs, Atlas quit, to sigh and grunt dolefully the remainder of the afternoon while snaking in logs and posts.

Toward evening several riders appeared in the trees some distance from the Mission. They were evidently Bestian's men, for after watching the work in the courtyard for a few moments, in a spirit of pure wanton mischief they opened fire.

Gard and Kid Emory promptly got into action, sending shots from the em-

bankment, while from the roof Harle Scally and Chance Whittaker emptied their rifles. For a few seconds before the horsemen disappeared into the brush there was a hot exchange of shots.

In back of the Mission Ann on Atlas was returning with Sandy Riddles, bringing in the last log. They stopped to listen to the shots, but as the firing ended, Ann got Atlas into motion again. Indolently Atlas heaved a sigh, ambled on a step or two and then, as was an old habit with him, bent his head to snatch a tuft of grass. The girl bent to jerk up his stubborn head, her red lips opening to deliver an indignant scolding.

At the exact moment she bent her head, there came the whine of a bullet which passed only inches, possibly but an inch, from her.

She stared for a moment, then slid off the horse to stand looking toward the tile-roofed ranch house. A little smoke came from one of the holes which had been chopped in the wall for rifles. From that hole Death had come, passing her by so close the flutter of his wings had been more than audible. If Atlas had not ducked for the mouthful of grass at just the right instant, Ann's head would have been in the path of that bullet and she would be dead now.

Sandy was swearing, holding his own rifle, looking hostilely toward the distant building, his eyes sharply fixed on the disappearing puff of gun smoke. "If I find out who did that, I'll beat out his brains with this rifle butt," he declared. "They was tryin' to murder you."

"It was an accident, Sandy," Ann shakily contradicted him. "Just an accident. Don't mention it."

But in her heart she knew it was no accident. Someone in that crowd wanted her killed and had taken advantage of the shooting to try to kill her. She knew none of the settlers and none of them knew her; it was hardly possible that one of them would want her out of the road. It was obvious that the bogus Ann Laird might want her out of the way if she knew Ann's identity, but she didn't know and she wasn't the kind to try murder anyway. Who then, Ann asked, had fired that shot?

Sandy Riddles was using his ax on a stump where a small round hole showed in the smooth surface.

"Accident!" he was muttering. "Accident, hell!"

(To be continued in the next issue)

Tragedies of the Terlingua

By Frank Collinson

Down in the Big Bend of the Rio Grande Frank Collinson went in 1888 and there for seven years lived and worked cattle and observed what went on about him. From his prodigious memory he has drawn the following stories, tragic but the stuff of which Frontier life was made.

FROM 1888 to 1895 I was ranching in the lower part of Brewster County, Texas, in what is the real Big Bend of the Rio Grande. I had been in that part of the country in the winter of 1882, looking for good cow country. I hadn't liked it for cattle range and had no intention of ever going there; but in 1888 I had a very good offer made me to buy a half-interest in a herd of cattle in the Big Bend and take charge of the whole business. So I went. That part of the country never was intended for cattle range. It is a poor grass country, and also very short of water. The grass, mostly what the Mexicans call *taboso,* is good when it rains but in dry weather no good at all. The hills had a fair covering of grama grass of different varieties, but none of that country ever had what you might call good sod.

The whole country was covered with cactus of every variety known to man. Lechuguilla was thick. In making round-ups the horses' legs up to the knees were always bleeding from the thorns on the leaves of the lechuguilla. By far the worst cactus was what we called the "devil's head." It has a short hard thorn with smaller thorns growing on the sides. There have been dozens of good horses crippled and ruined by this cactus thorn. In running cattle the horses often stepped on this "devil's head." Where it is hit fairly hard it will penetrate the sole of the hoof, or if it struck by the upper part of the hoof it will go clear up. Not much chance to cut it out. Of course you could cut some out, but for all that it has lamed and ruined many a good horse.

When I first saw that country, it abounded with deer, mostly the Mule Deer, commonly called Black Tail.

These deer have a black tail but are larger than the regular Black Tail which are a habitant of the Continental Divide and West. There was also a small variety of White or Flag Tail deer which is commonly called Sonora deer. I never saw any of the regular Virginia deer in that country, so common in South and East Texas and clear to the East Coast of America. I never killed a deer of any kind in the Big Bend country that its legs up to the knee were not full of thorns lying close to the bone. This country is rich in fossils of many prehistoric animals, but up to the present time there has been no oil found there. But on the Terlingua, the largest quicksilver mines in the U. S. are in operation.

Our ranch was on this creek, and between us and the Rio Grande the G-4 Ranch was located. The late Gen. Gano of Dallas was president of this cattle company. It is of this ranch and nearby country that I am writing. The cattle to stock this country were bought mostly in Uvalde, several hundred miles east, and were common Texas cattle. A big percentage of the cows were aged and too old to be shipped so far, so they were shipped to Marathon, in Brewster County, and driven to the ranch. This was in 1886. The first manager was the late J. B. Gillet, who had been a Texas Ranger from 1876 to 1882, when he resigned to become the city marshal of El Paso, at that time anything but an easy or safe job. This position he held for four years, when he quit to take charge of the G-4 Company, which job he held for two years until Pink Taylor took over the management. Taylor had been wagon and trail boss under Gillet.

During this time there was employed there a man by the name of Dick Duncan, commonly called Red Duncan. He was raised in San Saba County, in central Texas, just an everyday cowhand. He worked with our wagon, we all knew him well. Just about like the average west Texas cowpuncher. But he later turned out to be the most ruthless murderer on the Rio Grande. He left the ranch in the spring of 1889 with the intention of going to San Saba, and from all accounts he went there. He had five or six horses when he left. He was a tall, slim man in the early twenties; had a shock of red curly

hair, from which he derived the name of Red." Somewhere on the road between Alpine and Del Rio he fell in with a man of about the same age who was called Picknick Jones, although that was not his real name. He was from San Angelo, up in Tom Green County. The two left Del Rio and were next heard from at Barksdale on the Neuces River. It appears they got drunk there. A part of Co. D of the Texas Rangers was camped at Barksdale and the Rangers arrested Duncan and Jones for disturbing the peace. They paid a small fine and went on their way. The Rangers did not like their appearance or actions and kept an account of all they saw of them, which later helped in the conviction of Duncan.

Duncan's father and family lived in San Saba County. They went there during this time. Duncan was seen around a widow named Williamson, with two daughters. The oldest daughter was also a widow, by the name of Levonia Holmes; the younger, Beulah, was about eighteen; there was also a son Ben, about twenty, who was not overly bright. People thought Duncan and the girl were going to marry; but in the end it turned out that the widow, Mrs. Williamson, wanted to go to Old Mexico. At that time there was a lot of talk of colonists going to Mexico. Some did, but none of them ever made out and all eventually came back to the

U. S. Duncan told Mrs. Williamson he had some good land in Mexico which he would trade for her farm in San Saba and give her two hundred dollars to boot.

The trade was made and Mrs. Williamson, her two daughters and son left, accompanied by Red Duncan and Picknick Jones. She had a good new wagon and team. Red was to go with them and turn the place in Mexico over to them. They went through Barksdale. The Rangers took notice of the wagon and saw it had been sold by a firm in San Saba. In a store there, Red bought a piece of rope thirty or forty feet long. After leaving Barksdale no one ever saw any of the Williamson family alive again. Duncan and Picknick Jones took them to the Rio Grande below Del Rio. No one knows just what happened there. Duncan never admitted seeing them after they struck the river. The supposition is that he and Jones killed Mrs. Williamson and Ben soon after they reached the river, tied the two bodies together, weighted them with rock and threw them in the stream. They may have kept Levonia and Beulah one day or more and then killed both of them, tied them together like the other two and thrown them into the river too. Several days after, a man riding down the river saw what he thought was a bundle of old clothes. After examining it more closely, he saw it was the body of a woman. He went to the nearest ranch, several miles away, told what he had found and then went on to Del Rio. A deputy sheriff and others went to investigate and found all four bodies.

The body of Levonia had not been tied close enough to the rock and floated to the surface.

The news was telegraphed to San Antonio. The papers then printed a full description of the case. The Rangers read it and at once placed the murder on Red Duncan and Picknick Jones. Sergeant Aten of the Rangers was so sure it was the work of Duncan, he started at once for San Saba. When he got there he went to the sheriff to find out all he could about Red Duncan and Jones. The sheriff told him Duncan was in jail and been charged with the killing. He said Duncan came there and gave up, saying, "I know they will charge me with this killing, so I will give up. There is no doubt that someone killed them for what they had, for they had the two hundred I paid Mrs. Williamson for her place here."

Duncan was taken to Eagle Pass and jailed there. The jury inquest found, so I read in the papers at the time, that the girl Beulah had put up a good fight before she was attacked and murdered, and in one of her hands there was still some long red hair between her fingers. She and her sister had been clubbed to death. They later found Duncan's Winchester with the barrel bent. He went on trial and was sentenced to hang. The authorities could find no trace of Picknick Jones dead or alive. The general opinion was that Duncan had killed him also, he being the only living person who had seen and helped to kill these four persons.

The rope the bodies were tied with matched the coil of rope from which Duncan had bought the piece when passing through Barksdale. His defense lawyer put up the question, as the Rio Grande was an international stream. Did Texas or the U. S. have jurisdiction to try the case? And so the case dragged on from 1890 after he was sentenced to hang until Sept. 1891, when Governor Hogg telegraphed Sheriff Coke of Maverick County to let the law take its course. When Sheriff Coke read the Governor's message to Duncan, it was the first time his nerve gave way. He raved and cussed everyone in Texas from the Governor to the jailer. The gallows had been built several months before. About 11 a. m. on September 19, 1891, he was led out to be hanged.

His nerve was back as strong as ever. He looked at the gallows rope and then said to the sheriff, "I think, as you are going to hang a gentleman, you

might have painted the gallows. Anyway it would have looked a neater job." He never admitted his guilt, never implicated anyone in the killing. The sheriff said Duncan was the least excited man in the whole crowd who saw him hang.

Capt. Hughes, late of the Rangers and now living here in El Paso, never quit trying to find out what became of Picknick Jones. A few years ago he found out that Jones had lately died in Arizona. He had gone straight there and went to work on the cow ranches.

IN JUNE 1893, Pink Taylor took part of the G-4, two wagons, and went to Alpine for a day or two to load up supplies for the ranch. He was to commence to brand calves on his return. When he left Alpine for the return trip he took two boys with him for a visit to the ranch. He knew the parents of the boys. For the sake of any relatives of theirs who may still be living, I shall not reveal their real names but call them Jack Anglin and Ben Wickers. Both were about twelve years old.

All went along all right for a week or two. One morning Taylor went about his business and left the boys to help move camp to where they were to make the next round-up, and to help the horse herder drive the remuda of sixty or seventy horses. After they reached the round-up ground, the horse herder was herding the horses so the outfit could get a change of mounts as soon as the round-up was made. The cook was getting dinner ready. He said later that he heard these two boys quarreling but paid no attention and went on with his cooking. Suddenly he looked up and saw them fighting, and called to them to quit. The Wickers boy ran to the wagon where the cook had left his .44 Winchester on the seat. He grabbed it, turned and shot Jack Anglin dead. The cook took the gun away from him.

The horse herder heard the shot and ran his horse to camp to see what it was about, only to find the Anglin boy dead. He could see the dust of the cattle coming to the round-up ground. So he lit out fast as his horse could go and told Taylor what had taken place. When Taylor reached the wagon, he asked the Wickers boy why he had killed Jack. All he got out of him was, "I want to go home."

Taylor sent one of the hands to the ranch for a light wagon and team. They rolled the dead boy in a wagon sheet and took an extra team and saddle horses. The horse herder and one man drove the wagon to Alpine, seventy-five miles away. There was only one ranch on this rough wagon road—Bob Nevell's—which they made it a little after dark. Ben Wickers was riding in the wagon and complained of the cold and wanted to go to sleep. So he rolled up beside the dead boy and slept all the way to Alpine; never showed the slightest remorse for his act; paid no attention to his dead playmate.

When they got to Alpine, the youthful killer was locked up and the dead boy's parents notified. When the Anglin boy found himself locked up, he then let loose, bawling and crying, but to no use. Though he made nights hideous with his noise, he stayed in jail until court met. He was let out on bail and the case finally dismissed. I never heard what became of him. His parents moved. They have both been dead a long time now.

This cured Pink Taylor of ever having any more boys at the ranch. Taylor was a fine man in every way, and I believe the tragedy hurt him most. He never quit blaming himself for taking these boys to the ranch. After the ranch closed out he went to San Antonio. I heard a year or two ago that he died in East Texas.

NEARLY due west of the G-4 Ranch and on the west side of the Terlingua, Agua Fria Mountain rises abruptly four hundred feet, a perfect cliff of a

red rock facing east from the bank of the Terlingua. Along the cliff there are, or were, fifty years ago, dripping springs all along the east side, one of them the best spring of cold fresh water I ever saw in the whole Big Bend country. This is the *Ojo Agua Fria* cold spring. The west side of the mountain is a gradual rise which runs back a mile or more to rough cactus country, covered with sotol. This plant grows a good deal like the common bear grass, but the bear grass leaf is smooth where the sotol leaf resembles small saw teeth.

Both plants have large clusters of beautiful white, wax-like blooms. Cattle eat the blooms; in fact when they are in bloom in April cattle live on them. They are both food and water. In all this western country where the sotol plant grows—or did grow—there are numerous sotol pits where the Indians for ages cooked and ate the heart of the plant, which grows like a cabbage head. A sotol heart is about the size of a good cabbage. I have seen hundreds of these Indian sotol pits, but never saw but one in use.

Sotol is a good cow feed. In late years ranchmen have split it open and found that cattle do well on it. In the spring of 1895 I was driving a big herd of mixed cattle. They were thin and water was scarce. I had to drive slow on account of the poor cows and young calves. I had fifteen hands driving, mostly Mexicans. Before leaving I bought a dozen axes. After crossing the Southern Pacific Railroad and getting into the Glass Mountains country, we camped in or near good sotol country. The Mexican cowpunchers split and chopped sotol. I was away from water for the cattle two weeks before reaching the Pecos River, but the cattle did well on sotol. I got over that drive of hundred fifty miles with very little loss.

During the winter of 1891 we were in the midst of the worst drought I've ever known. Little or no rain for three years. A bunch of Mexican Indians came and camped near this Agua Fria spring. There were no immigration or game laws at that time. Anyone could cross the Mexican Border either way. The free zone was at that time still in operation. It was ninety miles wide into Mexico, so there was no one to try and stop these straying bunches of Indians coming and wintering on sotol and venison. I saw them build a sotol pit. They picked a rocky place and dug a round pit about twenty feet across. They piled the rocks all round to a depth of about four feet. Part of the men cut and packed sotol to the pit. When it was finished and several tons of sotol heaped up, the Indians filled the pit with wood (plenty of good mesquite all around), then set it on fire. They kept a big fire burning several days, then let it die down and filled the pit with sotol. Finally they covered the hole with a layer of rocks and built a big fire on top and all around. When these rocks were good and hot, they kept just enough fire going to keep the rocks at the same temperature. I can't say how long they kept the fire going at full speed, but long enough to cook the sotol. This they ate all winter.

These Indians killed deer and cooked them about the same way they did the sotol. I ate some of the sotol; it tasted a good deal like sweet potatoes. Today you can go to Juarez and buy maguey heart cooked like that sotol was. Maguey is considered a better plant. Tequila is made from the juice of this plant cooked, the juice pressed out and distilled twice. It makes a strong vegetable alcohol. Most Mexicans prefer it to good whiskey.

Agua Fria Mountain no longer watches the longhorn graze nor the Indian cook his sotol. But civilization hasn't quite tamed it, or has perhaps brought new and diabolical terrors. For only last year a small boy, twelve years old, was killed by a fall from Agua Fria, and a Texas court has found that the boy was deliberately pushed off the cliff.

Rodeo Fans' Association

Tex Sherman, ***Director***

Executive Committee

Fred McCarger, *secretary of the Rodeo Association of America*

Frank Moore, *manager of the Madison Square Garden Rodeo*

Grace Sparks, *secretary of the Prescott Frontier Days*

Harman W. Peery, *mayor of Ogden, Utah; president, Ogden Pioneer Days*

Charlie Murphy, *arena director of the Livingston Round-Up*

Roy Ritner, *secretary of the Pendleton Round-Up*

Robert D. Hanesworth, *secretary of the Cheyenne Frontier Days*

L. C. Morrison, *manager of the Black Hills Round-Up*

Howdy, Everyone:

I'm a Canadian girl, living in southwestern Saskatchewan, just north of the long range of Cypress Hills. I hope to do my part in your active club—the Rodeo Fans' Association. I can tell you quite a bit about the rodeos we have up here.

I suppose you've all heard of Don Parin? Well, his wife is Canada's well known trick-roper. At a rodeo two years ago in a town not far from here she performed a grand display of roping. She would take her jacket off, putting on and buttoning up another while the rope spun constantly about her. Another one of her clever tricks is to roll, light and smoke a cigarette inside her twirling rope.

Incidentally, we call rodeos stampedes up here.

Sincerely,

AGNES M. CONNABOY.

RODEO FANS' ASSOCIATION MEMBERSHIP COUPON

I hereby pledge my support to the cause of clean sportsmanship and the rodeo game.

(Miss)
(Mrs.)
(Mr.)

Name .....

Address .....

.....

I enclose ten cents for the Rodeo Fans' Association pin.

Rodeo Fans' Association, c/o Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York City.

7-21-39

OUT OF THE

Editor's Note:

Tex Sherman, who gives us the latest news of the rodeo world, is a real Westerner. He has punched cows and broken horses throughout the West. He has been rodeo contestant and judge himself.

He is willing to answer any questions you may have concerning any rodeo or any cowboy or cowgirl contestant. Don't hesitate to write and ask him for information about the rodeo game. Be sure, however, to enclose stamps for reply.

The rodeo's on, folks. Here they come, "Out of the Chutes" and into the arena, Tex Sherman announcing!

WIVES of rodeo contestants have their own organization. It is known as the Rodeo Friendship Club and its purpose is to bring together in the interest of rodeo and its stars the wives of various contestants. Officers of this pleasant club were elected during the Stock Show and Rodeo in Fort Worth. Mrs. Shorty Ricker was elected president; Mrs. Dick Truitt, vice-president; Mrs. Hub Whiteman, secretary; and Mrs. John Jordan is treasurer. There are forty-two members.

The Right Honorable R. B. Bennett will again donate a solid gold watch to the winner of the championship bucking horse contest at the Calgary Stampede. J. B. Cross, chairman of the rodeo, is offering a hundred dollars to the cowpoke winning the most points by the end of September at Alberta stampedes.

The saddle-making and outfitting firm of Hamley and Co. have thought up an unique idea. Instead of giving their usual one-hundred-dollar prize to the contestant who comes in at the top of the R. A. A. list of cowboy standings this year, they would like to present it to the twenty-fifth cowpoke.

Mr. L. H. Hamley says, "This would result in a prize to some cowboy who otherwise would just be out of the running." It's a generous and thoughtful idea. The contestant who wins the most points is generally given all the prizes, and Mr. Hamley's prize will spread the gifts interestingly. Who'll be the twenty-fifth cowboy at the end of the year? At the date of writing, it's Juan Salinas.

A new ruling for the Calgary chuck wagon races provides that a description of all horses must be submitted, so that last-minute changes in the teams may not be made without the permission of the judges. Another rule states that no one except the driver can be on the seat during the race.

Bea Kirnan, widow of the late Tommy Kirnan, has been engaged by Paul Whiteman as wardrobe mistress and will take to the road with Whiteman's outfit for the balance of the year.

The Cowboys' Turtle Association has announced that it has abolished its rules against members competing with non-Turtles and also its rule requiring that judges be selected from contestant ranks.

The Turtles have made a better place under the sun for contestants in the short while they have been active. Many just demands were made of some rodeo managers who were putting up prize monies that didn't equal the entry fees.

Larry Sunbrock, who stages many of the leading rodeos on the Pacific Coast, put over a classic at the Gilmore Stadium in

Los Angeles. Eighty thousand cash customers swung through the turnstiles—and that's a lot of cash and a lot of customers.

This Sunbrock genius of a producer has a new bucking horse that's said to be tougher and rougher than the famous late "Midnight." A special cash bonus has been offered to the bronc-rider who can ride him according to the rules, and that special prize is still snug in Sunbrock's pocket. The name of this bronc-buster, incidentally, is "Gone with the Wind."

Hazel Burns and Hazel McCart were the cowgirl highlights of the Los Angeles Rodeo. The McCart lassie rode steers and received a tremendous reception for her work and not because she was billed as the only grandmother in the world who is still contesting in world championship rodeos.

Sam J. Garrett, seven times winner in the championship trick-roping contest in the past twenty-five years, was among the featured ropers. George Rupp couldn't stay seated when the roping started, so he snagged himself a horse and rode for a roper.

Tex Cooper, the old-timer, took an important part in a pageant of the Old West, playing the part of an old-time sheriff. Hugh Strickland was on hand to rope a few calves, and Shorty Jack Miller, the "One-Eyed Connelly" of rodeo, was there, of course, too.

Luckiest of the new champions at the Southwestern Exposition and Fat Stock Show was Roy Matthews, lanky Fort Worth contestant. He was named all-around cowboy of the show in addition to winning the calf-roping championship. He won $1,218 for his week's work, plus a silver-handled engraved pistol as a gift from the governor.

Other champs of this rodeo were:

Steer-wrestling: Homer Pettigrew.
Bronc-riding: Vic Schwarz.
Bareback bronc-riding: Paul Bond.
Steer-riding: Kid Fletcher.
Trick roping: Chester Byers.
Cowboys' trick riding: Dick Griffith.
Cowgirls' trick riding: Pauline Nesbitt.

Viv Schwartz won his championship with a spectacular ride on "Five Minutes to Midnight." This famous 11:55 horse came out pitching and didn't stop once during the duration of the ride.

No major casualties were sustained at the rodeo, but Roy Cox and Bill Iler got knocked about some by their top-flight bucking outlaws.

Cuff Burrell, rodeo stock contractor of Hanford, Calif., is the owner of a strangely named and high-bucking horse. Some years ago Cuff heard of a horse that was causing its owner a lot of trouble by kicking all his farm equipment to pieces. Cuff found him a real bucker and bought him. Its former owner was a Jewish man who had complained so much about the horse's antics, that Cuff named the bronc "Crying Jew."

"Crying Jew" has thrown such riders as Nick Knight, Burel Mulkey, Pete Grubb and Jackie Cooper. He was only twice ridden successfully last year out of twenty-five times.

Adios,

Tex Sherman

Editor's Note:—This page is made up from contributions of readers. On it we shall publish original pieces of cartoons or verse or prose. The only requirements are that the persons submitting material be amateurs, and that the contributions be such as will appeal to people interested in the West and in Western stories. For each contribution published we will send the writer (or artist, if it is a cartoon) two dollars. Each person may submit more than one contribution.

Address all contributions to RANCH ROMANCES' Amateur Page, 515 Madison Avenue, New York City. All submissions will be considered. No submissions will be returned, nor can we enter into correspondence about your contributions. Remember—and this is important—all material must be original with the person submitting it, and not copied from anything else.

The West and the Sea

The cowboys roam on the Western range,
Merry buckaroos they be—
While I'm just a lonely sailor,
A-sailing this lonely sea.

The cowboy drinks his whiskey,
Spending his forty pay-day—
While I am downing this blasted rum
A-steering eastward to Bombay.

The cowboy swings his *señorita,*
And shoots intruders with a blast—
But I'm just a lonely sailor
A-swinging before this lonely mast.

Wade Magrum,
Peace River, Alta., Canada (Age 11)

Renegade Sweetheart

Moonlight rides with a man you love are supposed to be sweet, but Rita Cross could not see the sweetness of this one. Instead of holding hands and whispering, Rita had been roped, tied, and gagged and Sage Hardy was now taking her—where? Rita had not yet reached the point of anger or fear but was just curious as to why Sage was doing this. He swore that he loved her and she knew it was true. Then why this strange ride?

"Who rides thar?" a rough voice snapped from the shadows ahead.

"My name's Hale. I've got the Cross girl. Brite sent me," Sage spoke in a rolling speech, different than he always used, but his words were what amazed her. Hale! Why, she knew that his name was Hardy. Or maybe she didn't know! Then, at a rough command from the man ahead, they followed him.

A cabin loomed up ahead. They dismounted and went in, faced a half-dozen disreputable looking men. One, a large raw-boned person, looked at them with narrow eyes, then asked Sage, "Who are you?"

"Name's Tex Hale. Brite was busy in town and couldn't get out. He gave me orders to get the Cross girl and bring her here, so I did. Said for me to keep with you until he joined us later." Sage leaned carelessly against the table, rolling a cigarette.

"O. K., guess you're level. We're holdin' the girl till we get across the Border with her old man's cattle. He'll be scared to put the sheriff on the trail if we've got her. Better grab a bite; we're pullin' out in about a half-hour. You other boys roll up those blankets," the tall man issued orders in a level voice and was obeyed instantly.

Rita suddenly grasped the whole thing. Sage was a member of this gang which was rustling her father's herds! She looked at him and her eyes filled with helpless tears. An impulse to scream gripped her but the gag prevented its fulfillment. Then—it happened!

"Reach high, every one of you!"

Her eyes swung to the table and she saw Sage standing with two guns leveled on six very surprised men. A moment's silence then twelve hands went up.

"Rita, wiggle your hands out of that rope and take the guns off those gentlemen," Sage

was speaking naturally, his eyes on the men alertly.

A dazed moment, then Rita moved her hands, found the ropes loose and twisted them off. Her movements were mechanical as she disarmed the men.

"Now, take one of those loaded guns and shoot out the window three times."

The last of the three shots had hardly silenced when the beat of horses' hoofs sounded, halting before the cabin. Then Sheriff Reeves and his posse pushed into the room.

"Here they are, Sheriff. You'll have to find out from them where the Cross cattle are," Sage grinned at the gaping posse.

"How'd you get these guys, Sage?" the sheriff grunted.

"Caught a fellow snoopin' around the ranch. He had a note from the leader, here, tellin' him to kidnap Rita as a safeguard against Mr. Cross puttin' the law on their trail. So I kidnaped Rita myself instead."

"Wal, dawggone, I couldn't figger out why you wanted me here tonight to answer a three-shot signal but it sure was a good idea," the old sheriff grinned slyly.

Sage laughed, pushed open the door and led Rita, still gagged, out into the night.

"I'm not ungaggin' you until you have got all this straight. You see why I had to do what I did, don't you? I couldn't let you in on it for fear you'd accidentally give the show away. See, honey?"

Rita nodded. He grinned, took off the gag then whispered, "Now, how about that partnership that I mentioned the other night?"

Rita nodded again, then couldn't have spoken even if she had wanted to.

Maxine Parker, Shipman, Ill.

The Wild Horse

There's a beautiful horse way out on the plains,
His hooves on the ground are drumming.
He's black as coal and swift as light
As over the hills he's coming.

His mane and tail are clouds of delight,
In the wind they are madly streaming.
He pauses a bit as a bird in flight,
His coat in the sunshine gleaming.

His proud black head is high in the air,
That head which has never known bridle;
His legs are graceful and fleet as a deer—
Those legs which are seldom idle.

He's never been caught and put in a pen—
That horse with so noble a spirit,
On his back is no saddle, his head has no bridle,
That beauty would never bear it!

He has no brand, no one can claim him
And call him hers or his;
He's never been caught and put in a stable—
And it's my prayer he never is.

His eyes are intent, he watches a movement,
As someone comes into sight;
He snorts for an instant, then wheels to the west
And he's gone like a flash of bright light.

Lucille Carr, Maple City, Kans.

Old Battle-Ax

I'm kinda old and cranky,
Sixty year an' past,
But I still am forkin' leather,
An' I ride in with the last.

Oh, my eyes ain't so good no more,
Arms ain't quite so strong,
But I allus hold the herd in straight
An' my dallies don't go wrong.

I used to pack two forty-fives,
Belts loaded to the hilt,
But I never kept no records of
The badmen I have kilt.

Yes, I've seen a heap o' hombres die,
Most gener'ly plugged with lead,
But I 'specks I'll live a hundred year
'Fore I let the Death Hoss have his head.

'Member when I was a ten-year button,
I snuck out with a gun
To practice up behind the barn—
Whew! I kilt Pa's saddle dun!

Now, in the good old days of '86—
I have to sorta grin—
No nickel-plated spurs for me,
Shucks, mine were solid silver then.

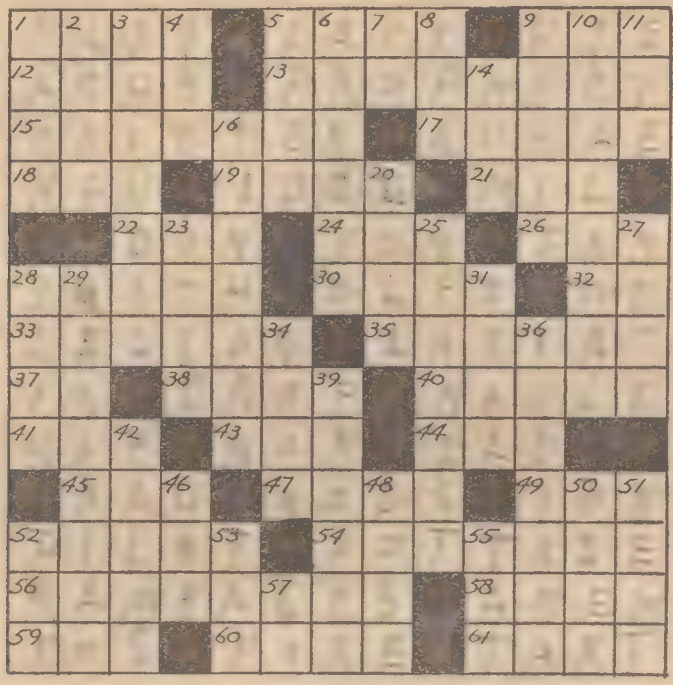
I've rode inside the law an' out,
Took chances on my life,
But they's just one battle I ain't yet fought—
I never took on a wife!

Guy Roy Jewell, Jr., Gonzales, Tex.

Honorable Mention

Grace Brown, Yorkton, Sask., Canada
Richard Lloyd, Paris, Ark.
Peter Zavisha, Outlook, Sask., Canada
Dorothy Winton, Iron River, Mich.

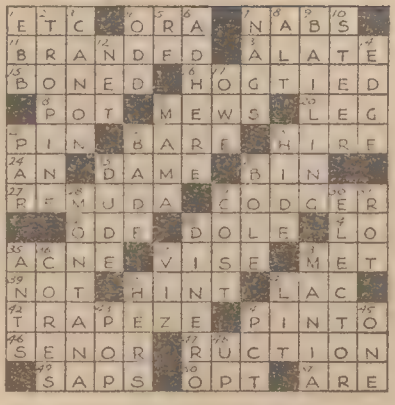
. The Westerners' Crossword Puzzle .



The solution to this puzzle will appear in the next issue.

Across

1. To go by
5. Bag-like parts
9. A compass point (Abbr.)
12. To pain
13. A prediction
15. A dumb animal
17. Emanations
18. Range of vision
19. An image
21. A unit of measure
22. To put on, as clothes
24. Yonder (Poetic)
26. The organ of hearing
28. A worker in metal
30. A butter substitute
32. You and I
33. A multitude
35. A cowboy's rope
37. I am (Contr.)
38. A riding whip
40. Land for grazing
41. To wash floors
43. A negative connective
44. Old (Poetic)
45. A cheer
47. Bows
49. An electrified particle
52. To guide
54. A thick soup
56. Acts violently
58. In a new way
59. Printers' measures
60. To study intently
61. A pastry



Solution to First July Puzzle

Down

1. A bundle
2. A land measure
3. A gala affair (Slang)
4. To place
5. Hastened
6. A small gully
7. Company (Abbr.)
8. A watering place
9. Ghostly
10. A rascal
11. The organ of vision
14. To buzz
16. A crooked gambler
20. To rest lazily
23. Pertaining to the ear
25. Closest
27. A network
28. Slender
29. In remembrance
31. By word of mouth
34. Midday
36. A midwestern State
39. Fitting
42. Tropical trees
46. To skip
48. A prescribed amount
50. A monster
51. A small salamander
52. A prefix meaning before
53. To strike lightly
55. To make lace
57. To depart

Trail's End Roll Call

Here, folks, are some more new members to welcome into your club:

Miss Helen Astor, Box 965, Anchorage, Alaska
Mr. Albert Bartlebaugh, Box 708, Indiana, Penna.
Mr. Ortha Thomas Bevan, Huntsville, Ohio
Miss Helen Boudreau, 275 Botsford St., Moncton, N. B., Canada
Mr. Albert Boye, Granville, N. D.
Miss Bessie Burrows, P. O. Box 203, Los Altos, Calif.
Miss E. Casey, Cockaroo P. O., Victoria, Australia
Mrs. Lillian Clark, 840 E. 150th St., Cleveland, Ohio
Mr. John W. Clowser, R. 3, Northwestern Grade, Winchester, Va.
Mr. Robert Coffelt, R. 1, Box 289, Bethel, Kans.
Mr. James M. Cox, 515 S. Market St., San Jose, Calif.
Miss Anne de Villiers, Calitzdorp, Cape Province, South Africa
Mr. Merlin Dolley, 508 Lincoln Ave., Reed City, Mich.
Miss Ethel Dowell, Lindsay, Va.
Miss Yvonne Embree, R. 1, New Westminster, B. C., Canada
Mr. Roger Farnum, Bryant Pond, Maine
Mr. William J. Flynn, Minerva, N. Y.
Miss Theresa Freitas, P. O. Box 534, Puinene, Maui, Hawaii
Mr. Thomas E. Garner, Kermett. Mo.
Miss Irene Gibbs, 323 Rugby Rd., Dagenham, Essex, London, England
Miss Olga Grotton, 561 Old County Rd., Rockland, Maine
Miss Emma M. Groves, Sherwood Park, Rensselaer, N. Y.
Mr. Carl E. Gundersen, 257—48th St., Brooklyn, N. Y.
Mr. Roscoe Haskell, R. 5, Box 28, Stockton, Calif.
Mr. Raymond A. Hawk, R. 3, Grand Junction, Colo.
Mr. Charles A. Henley, 105 E. Third St., Ashland, Ohio
Miss Kathryne Henry, Smithfield, Ohio
Miss Marie Hensel, 762 Forster St., St. Paul, Minn.
Miss Vera Hensel, 762 Forster St., St. Paul, Minn.
Mr. and Mrs. R. M. Johnson, Burgettstown, Penna.
Miss Betty Jones, 1563 Balfour Ave., Vancouver, B. C., Canada
Mr. James F. Kenney, c/o Infirmary, S and S Home, Quincy, Ill.
Mr. Frank Landis, Akron, Ind.
Mr. Richard D. Langford, 324 W. Fulton Place, Canton, Ill.
Miss Margery Mae Lewis, R. 1, Charleston, Ill.
Sgt. Arthur T. Lowery, Ser. Co., 14th Infantry, Ft. William D. Davis, Canal Zone, Panama
Mr. Manipo, 309 Central Ave., Apt. 8, Eau Claire, Wisc.
Mrs. Grace Mathias, c/o Louis Younkins, Gaithersburg, Md.
Mr. Frank Medlin, 1108 Richland St., Columbia, S. C.
Miss Betty Jean Miller, 106 Franklin St., Marietta, Ohio
Miss Alice Morits, 469 Cowie St., Granby, Quebec, Canada
Miss Doris Movchan, Butte, N. D.
Miss Margaret Mulkey, Speedwell, Va.
Miss Doris Mullinan, 10 Castle Hill Qts., 2nd R. N. Fus., Dover, Kent, England
Miss Inez Nelson, 326 Fourth St., N. E., Watertown, S. D.
Miss Jennie Nutter, 28 Georges Place, Dublin, Ireland
Miss Mildred Owens, 542 E. 20th St., Rome, Ga.
Miss Fannie Palmer, Parvin, Ky.
Miss Trixie PHcher, Public Hospital, Waipukurau, Hawkes Bay, New Zealand
Miss Vera Poaker, 3 Alverley View, Wodworth, Nr. Dorcaster, England
Miss Rose Reynierse, 5 Gladstone St., Oranjezicht, Cape Town, South Africa
Miss Billie Rhyne, R. 2, Clinton, Tenn.
Miss Bessie Schiely, 414 Sycamore St., Hamilton, Ohio
Mr. Robert Scholefield, Ganges P. O., Saltspring Island, B. C., Canada
Miss Madeline Seffern, Centreville, Kings County, N. S., Canada
Mrs. Gladys Short, R. 1, Selman, Okla.
Miss Jeanne Shuster, 25 Euclid Ave., Merchantville, N. J.
Miss Dovie Simpson, R. 1, Box 169, Middleboro, Ky.
Miss Mildred Slone, R. 2, Morenci, Mich.
Miss Iris Patricia Smart, 36 Garrett St., Nuneaton, Warwickshire, England
Miss Agnes Smith, Lynnmour P. O., B. C., Canada
Mrs. Thelma Stenger, 180 E. Pike St., Pontiac, Mich.
Mr. Frank Tivner, Jr., Box 183, Hemlock, Ohio
Mrs. Fred Todd, Valona, Ga.
Miss Lillian Tosteken, 108 Franklin St., Marietta, Ohio
Mr. Roy Toyonaga, Woodfibre, B. C., Canada
Mr. Roy A. Twedt, Langford, S. D.
Miss Joyce Vikan, Bottineau, N. D.
Miss Claudine Walker, Dallas, Wisc.
Miss Evelyne Weyerts, Brackettville, Texas
Sgt. V. T. Whitaker, Letterman General Hospital, San Francisco, Calif.
Mr. Don Wilcox, 206 Carroll St., Mt. Carroll, Ill.
Mr. Frank W. Williams, R. 2, Box 189, Madera, Calif.
Miss Ruth Wink, R. 2, Everett, Penna.
Mr. Fred Wolford, Sully, W. Va.
Miss Gertrude Wong, P. O. Box 63, Lanai, Hawaii

TRAIL'S END MEMBERSHIP COUPON

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(Miss)

(Mrs.)

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Please *print* your name and address plainly. 7-21-39

"OUR AIR MAIL" is running daily among the readers of RANCH ROMANCES in all parts of the world. Its purpose is to help readers make friends with people everywhere, near and far, at home and abroad.

You may write directly to anyone whose letter you find printed in this department. Remember, however, that all letters should reflect the clean, wholesome spirit of RANCH ROMANCES and contain nothing objectionable.

Moreover, this department is intended only for those people who actually wish correspondents. We ask you therefore to refrain from using it as a medium for playing practical jokes, and particularly ask you not to sign letters with other people's names. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 515 Madison, New York City, N. Y.

English Lassies

Dear Editor:

Here we are again, trying to get a letter in RANCH ROMANCES. We do hope you have a small corner for us this time.

We are two lonesome girls who would like to hear from all parts of the world. May, who is twenty, has dark brown eyes and hair. Aimee, who is twenty-six, has fair hair and gray eyes. We are both interested in films and stamps.

Sincerely,
MISS MAY SNOEKX,
MISS AIMEE ANDREWS.

The Mary Yollard Home,
Upper Hall,
Farnham, Surrey, England

Station-Mediterranean

Dear Editor:

I am a lonely sailor, stationed at present in the Mediterranean. I am twenty-one years old, and have blond hair and blue eyes, and I like dancing and swimming. Would be glad to answer all correspondents and exchange snapshots of the French Riviera, Africa and Spain.

Sincerely,
C. G. JONES.

Sm 3/c, Box 5,
USS Omaha,
Foreign Station,
% Postmaster,
New York, N. Y.

Traveling Westerner

Dear Editor:

I am an ex-seaman of thirty, with blond hair and green eyes. I like good music, and live on a real Western ranch on the Coast. I can promise interesting letters, as I've traveled a lot.

Sincerely,
JAMES FAIRBANKS.

R. 2.
Bothell, Wash.

A Very Lonely Nurse

Dear Editor:

I am a very lonely lady of forty-eight, and a constant reader of the Double R. I am a nurse, with gray-brown eyes and dark brown hair; I love home life, and am a good cook.

Sincerely,
MRS. IVA CHASE.

3870 Shafter Ave.,
Oakland, Calif.

Three Hobbies

Dear Editor:

I am twenty-three years old, and would like to hear from the United States and other countries. My hobbies are writing, swimming, and collecting snaps; and I love music and dancing. I have brown hair and blue eyes.

Sincerely,
MARJORIE BLUNSUM.

15 Toft St.,
Holt Rd.,
Liverpool, 7,
England

Keystone State

Dear Editor:
I am a foundry worker of thirty-one, with light brown hair and blue eyes. I live in the garden spot of the world, and can tell pen pals a lot about the Keystone State. I like sports, especially baseball, football and swimming—and I like to write letters.

Sincerely,
ALVIN RESH.

R. 1,
Columbia, Penna.

Girl on a Farm

Dear Editor:
I am a lonely girl of thirteen, living on a farm. I would like pen pals from everywhere.

Sincerely,
EUNICE URBECK.

Cedar, Minn.

Cheer Her Up, Pals

Dear Editor:
Here's an SOS for pen pals. I am lonesome, and really need letters to cheer me up. I am twenty-five years old, and have brown hair and brown eyes. Won't all those boys and girls from twenty to thirty years old who want a pal write to me? To the first five I'll send a picture of myself.

Sincerely,
ROSA HARRIS.

3508 N. 11th St.,
Ft. Smith, Ark.

Her Hobby Photography

Dear Editor:
I am sixteen years old, and have black hair and blue eyes. I like all sports, dancing, reading and movies. My hobby is photography. To the first eight that write I will send a souvenir of Virginia. I'll answer all letters, and will exchange snapshots.

Sincerely,
HELEN ADKINS.

R. 4, Box 52,
Chatham, Va.

Sincere Pen Pals

Dear Editor:
Won't you give two lonesome soldiers a break? We would like to hear from sincere pen pals from all over the world. William is thirty years old and Jack is thirty-two years old.

Sincerely,
WILLIAM J. VODA,
E. J. SMITH.

Q. M. Det.,
Ft. Dix, N. J.

Two Lonely Sisters

Dear Editor:
We are two lonely sisters living on a farm. Zelma is eighteen and Marie is sixteen. We both have brown hair and blue eyes, and are interested in music, reading and collecting songs and pictures. We would especially like to correspond with cowboys, cowgirls and sailors, but all letters are welcome.

Sincerely,
ZELMA JONES.
MARIE JONES.

Box 36,
Bon Wier, Texas

Aviator-to-Be

Dear Editor:
I am seventeen years old, and my ambition is to be an aviator. I'd like to hear from girls about my own age, and will exchange snaps.

Sincerely,
MAYNARD BROWN.

Port Lorne,
Anna. Co., N. S.,
Canada

Wanted—a Pen Pal

Dear Editor:
I am a widow of forty-five, and have brown eyes. I live alone and work in a shop. I would like to have a pen pal, man or woman.

Sincerely,
GRACE E. DARLING.

6 N. Main St.,
Auburn, Maine

A Ranch in the Hills

Dear Editor:

I live away out in the Cypress hills, on a cattle ranch, and our nearest neighbors are two and a half miles away. The nearest town is thirty miles away. It gets lonesome here, and I would like pen pals from all over the world.

Sincerely,
MARJORIE LESLIE.

Box 599,
Maple Creek,
Sask., Canada

World Traveler

Dear Editor:

For six years I have been a constant reader of RANCH ROMANCES, and this is my first attempt to crash into Our Air Mail. I am twenty-seven years old, with dark eyes and dark wavy hair. I have done the world as far east as China, visited Hawaii, and have been in all forty-eight of the United States. I can promise interesting letters to any and all pen pals, and will gladly exchange snapshots.

Sincerely,
JOHN AVERALL.

1303 Carson St.,
Pittsburgh, Penna.

A Call to the Cow Country

Dear Editor:

I would like to hear from cowboys and cowgirls from twenty to twenty-five, especially those living in Montana, Wyoming, Colorado and Arizona. I am fond of animals and the outdoors.

Sincerely,
VIRGINIA FOX.

Fairview,
Quakertown, Penna.

A Floating House

Dear Editor:

My home is a modern, ten-ton houseboat which I built at Ft. Benton, Montana, and floated through the Ft. Peck dam. At present I'm employed by a construction company on the river, but I plan to settle in the South and raise fruit. My favorite sport is fishing, and I'm interested in astrology. I would like to hear from people under forty-five.

Sincerely,
ALLAN R. CARPENTER.

c/o Woods Bros.,
Tekomah, Nebr.

Seventeen Miles from Town

Dear Editor:

It gets pretty lonesome here on the farm, seventeen miles from town. I am thirty-four years old, and I want everyone to write to me.

Sincerely,
GLADYS SHORT.

R. 1,
Selman, Okla.

A Southern Pal

Dear Editor:

I would like some pen pals. I am a hardware clerk of twenty-one. Hunting and fishing are my favorite sports, and I like to dance.

Sincerely,
ARCHIE POWELL, JR.

1 Crescent Drive,
Statesboro, Ga.

Older Folks

Dear Editor:

I am a widow of fifty-three, with dark hair turning gray, and gray eyes. I'd like to hear from pen pals near my own age or older.

Sincerely,
MRS. ENA ADAMS.

Box 121.
Lakeview, Ore.

Sports and Letters

Dear Editor:

I am a boy of nineteen, with black hair and blue eyes. I like all sports, and I'd like to have letters from girls and boys.

Sincerely,
TRUMAN R. BREECE.

CCC Co. 4769,
Mackay, Idaho

Real Cowboys and Cowgirls

Dear Editor:

I am a girl of fourteen, with brown hair and hazel eyes. I'm hoping to hear from people all around the world, and especially those of the West who are real cowboys and cowgirls.

Sincerely,
BETTY FOWLER.

R. 1, Box 279-B,
Ventura, Calif.

Quite a Job

Dear Editor:

Being a dad and a mother to five growing children is no easy task for a man of moderate means, but I'm improving day by day. Would you try and find me some pen pals from all over the world? I've passed the forties, but I'm not fat, and I'd like to hear from people from fifteen to fifty.

Sincerely,
ARTHUR H. SWAIN.

132 E. 20th St.,
Paterson, N. J.

Interesting Letters

Dear Editor:

I have brown hair and gray eyes. I am lonely, and would like to correspond with boys and girls from fourteen to twenty-one. My letters will be very interesting, I assure you.

Sincerely,
MOLLIE WRIGHT.

1718 Bailey Ave.,
Jackson, Miss.

What's Your Birthday?

Dear Editor:

I'd like very much to have a few pen pals of any age. I am thirty-three years old, and I collect clippings, pictures, post card views and old songs. I'll be glad to exchange post card views and old songs with anyone interested in them, and I'll be especially pleased to hear from anyone whose birthday falls on August twenty-fourth, which is my birthday.

Sincerely,
RALPH LATHAM.

4035-B N. 25th St.,
St. Louis, Mo.

Mountain Girl

Dear Editor:

I'm a lonely girl of the mountains, and would like to have some pen pals. I'm fifteen years old, with blond hair and blue eyes. Besides corresponding, my hobbies are fishing and hiking. I love all string music, especially that of a guitar. Boys and girls everywhere, from thirteen to thirty, are welcome to write.

Sincerely,
HAZEL BUCHANAN.

Spruce Pine, N. C.

Hoping

Dear Editor:

Once again I'm writing, in the hope that I may see my letter in print. I'd like to correspond with friends far and near, and I'm sure I could interest anyone who cares to write. I am nineteen years old.

Sincerely,
EDWIN SKELTON.

24 Ravendale St.,
Scunthorpe,
Lincolnshire, England

A Little Girl

Dear Editor:

I am ten years old, and have brown hair and blue eyes. I like all outdoor sports, and would enjoy having letters from children near my own age, from all over the world.

Sincerely,
ELFRIEDA FIPPS.

Paden, Okla.

Calling All Pals

Dear Editor:

I am twenty-one years old, and my favorite sports are hunting, skating and baseball. I'll be glad to hear from anyone who cares to write, and will exchange photos.

Sincerely,
MAURICE DUNCAN.

Nace, Va.

OUR AIR MAIL

Calling a Ranch Girl

Dear Editor:

I would like to correspond with a girl around sixteen years old who really lives on a ranch. I don't have any hobbies, because I don't like to do things by myself, but I'll glady help other people with their hobbies. I'm sixteen years old, and have brown hair and blue eyes.

Sincerely,
FORREST R. HARPER.

Boyer, W. Va.

World's Fair Souvenirs

Dear Editor:

My hobbies are collecting Western pictures and sketching, and my ambition is to someday be called a cowgirl. I would like to hear from cowboys and cowgirls, and I'll tell them all about city life. I'll send a World's Fair souvenir to the first three who write.

Sincerely,
ELAINE CAREY.

19 W. 82nd St.,
New York, N. Y.

Old Mexico

Dear Editor:

SOS for pen pals. I'm a soldier down near the Mexican Border—twenty-one, with blond hair and blue eyes. Exchanging snaps will be a pleasure, and I'll be glad to tell about the Southwest and old Mexico.

Sincerely,
LAWRENCE E. GARRETT.

William Beaumont General Hospital,
El Paso, Texas

Perseverance

Dear Editor:

Five times I've tried to get a pen pal, so I hope I make it this time. I'm fourteen years old, with brown hair and brown eyes, and I'd particularly like to hear from boys overseas between fourteen and eighteen. I like dancing, swimming and skating.

Sincerely,
DOREEN LEWIS.

56 Blenheim Rd.,
Walthamstow,
London, E. 17, England

Foreign Pals

Dear Editor:

I have written to pen pals all over the world, and now it's my turn to get some letters. I have dark hair and blue eyes, and am seventeen years old; and I would enjoy hearing from people in foreign countries.

Sincerely,
WINETTA HUGHES.

9016-14, N. W.
Seattle, Washington

Reward for Mr. Jones

Dear Editor:

This is my fourth attempt to be honored on the select pages of the Double R. and I shall be as persistent as Robert the Bruce. Cooking in forestry and government camps during the annual field season is my occupation; with architecture, sports and photography as hobbies. I'm a redhead of twenty-four, and possess a sincere desire for pen pals.

Sincerely,
WILLIAM J. JONES.

3511 E. Broad Ave.,
Hillyard Station,
Spokane, Wash.

Interested in Travel

Dear Editor:

I am twenty-one years old, and have fair hair and blue eyes. At present I am valet to a surgeon, and formerly did a spell as steward on a liner traveling between Southampton and New York. I am interested in travel, music, cycling and the movies; and would like to hear from girls everywhere, between the ages of seventeen and thirty. I will exchange snapshots.

Sincerely,
PETER HAYDEN.

8, Albury Drive,
Pinner Hill Rd.,
Pinner, Middlesex,
England

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29x4.50-20		2.35	1.05	31x4	2.95	1.25
30x4.50-21		2.40	1.15	32x4	2.95	1.25
28x4.75-19		2.45	1.25	33x4	2.95	1.25
29x4.75-20		2.50	1.25	34x4	3.25	1.35
29x5.00-19		2.80	1.25	32x4½	3.35	1.45
30x5.00-20		2.85	1.25	33x4½	3.45	1.45
6.25-17		2.90	1.35	34x4½	3.45	1.45
28x5.25-18		2.90	1.35	30x5	3.65	1.65
29x5.25-19		2.95	1.35	33x5	3.75	1.75
30x5.25-20		2.95	1.35	35x5	3.95	1.75
31x5.25-21		3.25	1.35			
5.50-17		3.35	1.40			
28x5.50-18		3.35	1.40			
29x5.50-19		3.35	1.45			
6.00-16		3.75	1.45			
6.00-17		3.40	1.40			
30x6.00-18		3.40	1.40			
31x6.00-19		3.40	1.45			
32x6.00-20		3.45	1.55			
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7.00-20	5.95	2.95	9.75-20	13.95	6.45
7.50-20	6.95	3.75			

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RANCH ROMANCES

Two Cowgirls

Dear Editor:

We are two lonely cowgirls. Angie is fourteen, and Rosalie is thirteen. Our hobbies are tap dancing, ice skating and driving cattle. We would prefer to hear from boys our own age, but we'll answer all letters.

Sincerely,
ROSALIE MORRELL,
ANGIE ANFDENGARTEN.

Arthur, Nebr.

Three Students

Dear Editor:

We're three lonely students. Bill is nineteen, and has brown hair and blue eyes—he likes sports, especially football. Duke is twenty-one, and has brown hair and eyes—he's president of the student council, and is interested in photography. Elman is twenty, and has brown hair and brown eyes—he, also, likes outdoor sports. We'd like to hear from people all over the world, and will exchange snaps.

Sincerely,
BILL COLE,
DUKE IMPOLA,
ELMANN BEDNARZ.

Cassidy Lake Technical School.
Chelsea, Mich.

Raises Pigs

Dear Editor:

I'm a lonely pig raiser of eighteen, living in the hills of southern Ohio. I hope this letter brings me scads of pen pals. I'll exchange snaps.

Sincerely,
JESS EUGENE DYSERT.

R. 1.
New Plymouth, Ohio

A Lonesome Place

Dear Editor:

I am a young woman of thirty-seven, with brown eyes and brown hair. I live on a farm, and I get lonesome. I'd like to have pen pals from all parts of the world.

Sincerely,
MARY ETTA SANDERS.

Star Route,
Box 32.
Rowlesburg, W. Va.

Interested in Many Things

Dear Editor:

Won't you please print my letter? I sure hate an empty mailbox, and I want to hear from people anywhere, particularly California. I am a widow of thirty-two, with brown hair and blue eyes. A great many things interest me, so pen pals need not worry about what to write. I'll exchange snapshots.

Sincerely,
BETH EDELL.

R. 2, Box 695,
Puyallup, Wash.

Letters from Guys and Gals

Dear Editor:

I am fifteen years old, and have brown hair and brown eyes. I've been reading your magazine ever since I can remember, and enjoying it very much. Wish some of those guys and gals would toss a few letters my way.

Sincerely,
KATHERINE DOW.

Conway, N. H.

Ex-Farmer

Dear Editor:

I am a widower of sixty, and an ex-farmer. Won't some pals write to me—no matter where they live? I like sports, and am quite a movie fan. I'll exchange snaps.

Sincerely,
JOSEPH H. DE LONG.

Great Barrington, Mass.

"A Good Disposition"

Dear Editor:

I am just a plain boy of eighteen, with blue eyes and blond hair—and a good disposition. I would like to hear from boys and girls living in the West.

Sincerely,
ALTON GLIDDEN.

R. 1,
Franklin, Vt.

Foreign and Western Pals

Dear Editor:

I am sixteen years old and have black hair and blue eyes. I like to hunt and fish, and I would enjoy hearing from pals in foreign countries and the West.

Sincerely,
JACK PRICE.

R. 2,
Chesaning, Mich.

Linguist

Dear Editor:

Here's a young lad who would like to correspond with boys and girls in Egypt, India, South America and the Philippines. I am nineteen years old, and have sandy hair and blue eyes. I like the outdoors, and am interested in Indian lore. I have many Indian relics and photos of famous chiefs. I speak Spanish, German and Norwegian, and I enjoy music and the movies.

Sincerely,
ROY A. TWEDT.

Laongford, S. D.

A Japanese Girl

Dear Editor:

Being in a sanatorium, I have lots of spare time to write to boys and girls all over the world. I am a Japanese girl of sixteen, with black hair and dark eyes. My hobbies are collecting movie stars' pictures and poems.

Sincerely,
CHERRY YAMAGUCHI.

Ward 302,
Olive View Sanatorium,
Olive View, Calif.

"Honest to Goodness"

Dear Editor:

People of all ages, of either sex, please write to a lonely farm lad. I'm no fortune hunter, no stamp collector, nor anything but an honest-to-goodness pen pal.

Sincerely,
JOSEPH E. ARON.

c/o A. T. Dawson,
R. 2,
Maplesville, Ala.

Western Cowpuncher

Dear Editor:

I am a Western cowpuncher, living in the upper Sacramento Valley, on the 111 Ranch. I'm interested in hearing from friends all over the world, especially British soldiers in India, and I'll exchange snaps.

Sincerely,
H. H. MARX.

P. O. Box 224,
Anderson, Calif.

Brave British Soldiers

Dear Editor:

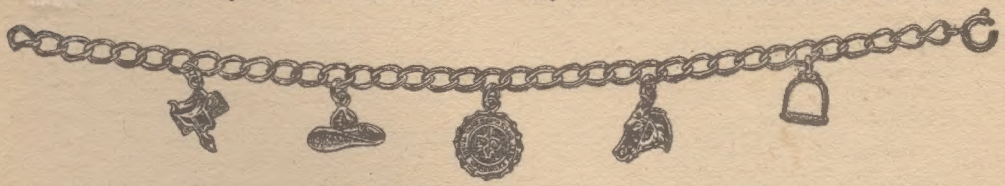
We are stationed on the famed Northwest Frontier, and can give pen pals eye-witness accounts of some hazardous encounters. In addition, we have photos of happenings that few people have seen.

Sincerely,
WILLIAM GOODSIR,
WALTER JOHNSTON.

Royal Corps of Signals,
Brigade Signals,
Bannu, Waziristan, India

Do You Like Charm Bracelets?

Made especially for the readers of Ranch Romances, these handsome and amusing charm bracelets are the very latest adornment. Twenty-four carat yellow gold-filled, with five delightful Western charms attached, these newest bracelets cost only twenty-five cents. You'll want one of them whether you own one of the old-style Trail's End bracelets or not.



If you desire one, send this coupon, together with twenty-five cents, to the Trail's End Editor, Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York.

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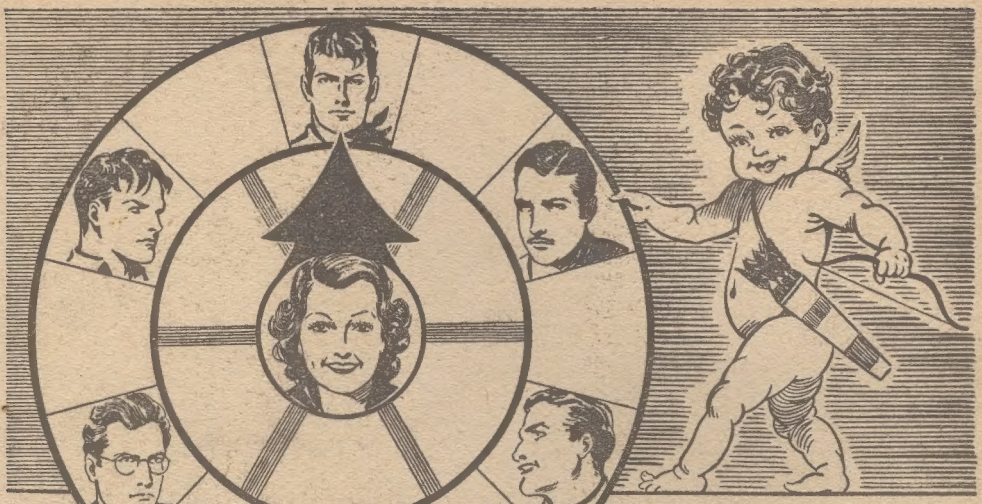

Whom Shall I Marry?

By Professor Marcus Mari

The Cancer Man

WHEN a man whose birthday falls between June 22nd and July 23rd tells you that a certain thing will be done, you can absolutely trust that it will be as he promised, if it is humanly possible. A man born under this zodiacal sign, Cancer, doesn't know what it means to quit. He is like the symbol of Cancer, crab-like in his tenacity of purpose.

This man is a natural molder of men, and of opinions. He makes a profound, convincing speaker whether from the pulpit or the soap box. He is a humanitarian as well as an idealist. He has a real sense of the dramatic and a sure grasp of essential facts. On the bridge at sea he makes a splendid figure because other men respect him and his words.

He's dependable, girls. You can always count on the Cancer man. He's forward-looking but also reverences past traditions. You may sometimes think he's old-fashioned and overcareful and maybe a bit of a stick-in-the-mud, but if you match your wits against his in a business deal you will quickly change your mind. He is the ideal mate for two kinds of girls. First, the flighty, laughing, flirtatious sort needs this kind of man to hold her down, to watch out for her, to curb her mad fancies. Secondly, the girl who is like himself, careful, thoughtful, idealistic, will find in him a real companion.

In his home life he is tender, devoted, affectionate and considerate. He adores children and wants his own around him. The girl who will probably make him happiest is one born in November, or under the sign of Leo, Pisces, Libra and Scorpio.

The Cancer man has one trait which he should beware of. He has a tendency to resent criticism. His feelings are easily hurt. Criticism is often instructive and constructive and he should take it in this light. He is almost morbidly sensitive, but knowing this failing, he can easily overcome it.

He should be careful in selecting his life mate. She should be the sort of girl who wants a home and family above all else. She must be strictly honest and sincere as he will find he cannot tolerate anything else. She should be affectionate, to meet his ardent nature, and sympathetic of his ideals.

Professor Mari will be glad to give a personal reading to anyone who sends him this coupon in care of Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Avenue, New York. ENCLOSE STAMPED AND SELF-ADDRESSED ENVELOPE.

Name_____ Sex_____

Address_____

Exact date of birth: Year_____ Month_____ Date_____ 7-21-39

In the next issue Professor Mari will analyze women born between July 23rd and August 22nd.

SCAN COURTSEY OF
EXCITER